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ABSTRACT

This report presents the second phase of a 4-year study commissioned by the Australian National Training Authority (ANTA) to examine the dynamics of Vocational Education and Training (VET). Ten case studies, most involving rural or indigenous communities, are presented, each illustrating an aspect of VET. Twenty-six findings and implications for action are drawn from this information. The major finding is that VET outcomes are most effective in learning communities characterized by proactive, collaborative effort. VET that takes place in informed communities that can work with VET providers is most likely to match the needs of the community. This finding suggests a fresh approach to assuring VET quality, one that is built on the dynamics of effective VET rather than focusing on particular stakeholders. Resources used to equip communities with human infrastructure for collaboration are a cost-effective investment that will improve the returns to resources spent on VET. By encouraging and assuring sound local dynamics in VET with resourced strategies that promote responsive and distinctive regional solutions, ANTA can expect to see a greater uptake and use of national frameworks, and greater acceptance of the usefulness and relevance of national strategies. (Contains 260 references.) (TD)

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Building Dynamic Learning Communities: Ten Regional Case Studies

Centre for Research and Learning in Regional Australia

January 2001

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Building Dynamic Learning Communities:

Ten Regional Case Studies

Centre for Research and Learning in
Regional Australia

January 2001

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Introduction

Dynamics of VET in regional Australia: VET learning communities in action

Overview

This is a report on the second phase of a four-year longitudinal study, 'The Role of VET in Regional Australia', which is funded by the Australian National Training Authority (ANTA).

The report is presented as a set of ten individual site case studies, each illustrating an aspect of 'configurations of VET', and a summary chapter. The term 'configurations' was defined in the report on the 1999 phase of the study as the various combinations of human and physical resources that are brought together in particular ways to produce the VET outputs for a site. These configurations describe the key features of *learning communities* — the collective dynamic that promotes the local effectiveness of VET. Following the ten case studies is a final chapter that synthesises the issues from the ten cases into a coherent set of statements summarising the outcomes of the research conducted in 2000.

Why this research?

In response to ANTA's request to understand more about the dynamics of VET across ten of Australia's regions, CRLRA negotiated with ANTA that this research would report on what was happening with VET in these regions. CRLRA embarked on a four-year longitudinal knowledge-building project. This set of case studies reports on the second of these four years.

Building knowledge is a slow and systematic process and, as these case studies will show, the dynamics of VET are multi-dimensional and ever-changing. Stakeholders in VET consist of students, trainers, enterprises, industries, communities, regions, as well as the government partners such as local, State and Commonwealth bureaucracies and policy arms.

Aim of the research

The aim of the year 2000 research was:

> *To investigate the contribution of VET to regional Australia and identify features of configurations of VET that are effective in meeting the needs of different stakeholders and communities.*

The research has articulated the aim as a set of seven specific research questions which are grouped under three headings:

A ***Changes and context***

1 What are the changes in regional Australia over approximately the last five years in terms of:

- Industry profiles
- Employment demands – existing and emerging
- Skills profiles
- Levels of participation in education and training?

2 What are the key factors driving these changes (global, national, regional and local)?

B ***Configurations***

3 What are the different configurations of VET provision occurring and how do they relate to these changes?

4 How and why did the different configurations of VET provision emerge?

5 How do the different configurations of VET provision meet the changing needs of stakeholders?

C ***Effectiveness***

6 How effective are the different configurations of VET provision in meeting the needs of the stakeholders?

7 What actions should be taken to improve effectiveness of VET in meeting stakeholders needs in various regions?

The section that follows describes how this present case study report links with the earlier reports submitted to ANTA.

Links between this report and previous reports

The first year of the longitudinal study began in 1999 with seven sites across the nation. Following discussions with ANTA about the research program for the year 2000, it was decided to add three new sites to the existing seven. The three new sites would undergo substantially the same inquiry as for the seven sites in 1999, so bringing the information base level with the ten sites. In addition, the 2000 research would gather a common set of data from the ten sites, and report through the three contracted research outputs.

The data collection methods and instruments used in 1999 with the original set of seven sites were used with some minor modifications in the three new sites in 2000.

May 2000 Report

The May 2000 Report presents a synthesis of the relevant literature, the background statistical material for the ten sites and additional information from the 1999 project data as specified in the contract between ANTA and CRLRA.

Key findings from May 2000 Report:

The diverse nature of each region studied stands out as a major feature of consideration for effective VET outcomes at local and national levels. The nature of specific changes at each site varied dramatically, related to the differential impact of fairly uniform global and national drivers of change. Government policy and strategy is the single greatest national influence on change. The local contextual conditions at each site under which VET operates are coopted by a variety of collaborative and partnership responses. The nature of these collaborations appears to influence the effectiveness of VET.

October 2000 Report

The October 2000 Report presents:

(a) A synthesis of the May 2000 Report's literature review outcomes

(b) Site-by-site profiles of the original seven sites

(c) Site-by-site profiles of the three new sites

(d) Analysis of questionnaire items on an item-by-item basis,

(e) Preliminary findings as possible from the initial data analyses to September 2000

NOTE 1:

Sections of the October 2000 Report present a site-by-site analysis of the data available concerning (a) site descriptions and recent changes, (b) changes in those sites over the life of the project, and (c) perceived effectiveness of VET in each site.

These descriptions are complete, and there is no reason to duplicate this in the final report.

NOTE 2:

Numerical summaries and tabulations using various forms of statistical checks are commonplace in qualitative research such as this, as evidenced in any text on the subject. Silverman (1997) devotes a large part of a chapter on validity and reliability in qualitative research to techniques for the incorporation of quantitative data into qualitative studies (pp. 144–170).

Numerical and statistical work within qualitative studies is especially indicated in survey or questionnaire responses: 'Research … might … engage in survey research and employ the quantitative method of statistical analysis' (Crotty, p. 6). Statistics are used (a) to summarise the responses. They are also used (b) to make decisions about whether a theme or issue is more widely perceived, and (c) to establish the relative importance of emerging themes in the views of the respondents. These outcomes provide guidance for further areas of investigation and analyses of the data within the project, and build towards a fully developed view of the data. They are extremely appropriate at an early stage of analysis such as the October 2000 Report.

Tabulations are not used in this kind of research to make generalisations to other sites. Only after all forms of analyses are complete is it possible to make claims about possible ways in which the findings for this study might apply elsewhere, but then only within the bounds of the limited data available and with the proviso of a certain degree of tentativeness. Claims made in findings for this kind of qualitative research are made in this tentative fashion, and should always be examined with a view to additional research as required to confirm or reject the tentative nature of the qualitative findings.

At no time in the October 2000 Report is a warrant taken for generalising more widely than the ten sites. Neither are statistical comparisons across sites made beyond the formative summation of relative importance of possible issues and themes for further analysis using NUD•IST, other thematic analyses and case study analysis.

Given these provisos for the October 2000 Report, there is sufficient warrant in the data from the 10 sites to state the following with a reasonable degree of confidence:

Key findings from October 2000 Report:

1. VET services are not considered adequate by smaller rural centre questionnaire respondents;
2. Course participation is perceived to lead to enhanced self confidence, but limited employment outcomes;
3. Effective networks at the local level were reported to increase the likelihood of effective VET outcomes, though competition in small-sized communities was seen as damaging to positive collaboration;
4. Flexible delivery is seen as a benefit in most cases, but not sufficient as a stand-alone vocational learning medium;
5. There was widespread concern about the quality of training and assessment. The reasons given were the difficulty of attracting proficient trainers and assessors, and because of insufficient funding and other resources.

Final Report January 2001

Case study methodology

In response to ANTA's request for a case study approach to the final report, the research team considered several options within the case study research methodology literature. Case study is not a uniformly understood or applied term. There are many differing kinds and purposes for case studies, which can be as small as the case study of a single training session, for example, or as large as the case study of a whole country.

In consideration of the gradual build-up of year 2000 research outcomes from the literature review and site-by-site analyses to the present report, the most appropriate form was selected. This form allows the evolution of cases studies about individual sites to occur from the more empirical approach to analysing questionnaire item responses. The case study method adopted for this report follows rigorously the procedures, techniques, format and other stylistic features established by Robert Stake, whose reputation as an educational and training evaluative case study expert is unparalleled.

Stake (1995) distinguishes between Intrinsic and Instrumental case study. This report is based on Instrumental case study criteria. The features of Instrumental case study include:

1 That they address specific research questions rather than being more open-ended (p. 3);

2 That the use of this type of case study is *instrumental* to understanding something else (p. 3) — in this instance, we seek to understand the dynamics of VET in regional Australia;

3 That is in the event of a major case study *(Dynamics of VET in Regional Australia)*, it contains focused case studies that are *instrumental* to learning something more about the overall question.

The distinction is important because, as Stake puts it, 'the methods will be different, depending on intrinsic and instrumental interest' (p. 4). These differences are reflected in the diversity of data drawn upon across the ten case studies, as well as in the cross-referential manner in which the synthesis chapter addresses the research questions and the derived findings. In the synthesis chapter, the research questions are answered by drawing on the findings from the individual case studies in relation to across-site considerations. Issues that arise include diversity and distance, collaboration, flexible delivery and quality vocational learning.

Using Stake's principles, this final report provides a case study of each of the ten sites to sharpen the focus on an element of the overall project outcomes as related to one or more of the seven research questions. The ten case studies together become a major, or Collective Case Study (Stake, 1995, p. 4) of the dynamics of VET in regional Australia. The final chapter of the Collective Case Study synthesises the ten component case studies. In the synthesis, the research questions are answered as a whole, by reference to cross-site data and qualitative comparisons, and the findings are presented.

The major, or Collective Case Study, therefore, consists of this chapter, the ten site-specific case studies that follow, and the final 'synthesis' chapter. Much of the material in the two attachments, important to have as reference to the case studies as required, has already been published as the October 2000 Report.

The case study format of this volume is only one of several possible ways of reporting on the major empirical research conducted this year — many of which will be pursued as part of the CRLRA dissemination program. Readers need to be aware that the style and method of drawing conclusions from case studies differs from that found in some more conventional research reports, but the outcomes are the same — that is, the research findings are consistent.

Generalisability and case study research

The case study format requires the reader to be aware of its limitations and potential. A key issue with this 'knowledge-generation' type of qualitative research is that of 'generalisation'. An understanding is needed of the extent to which generalisation is possible. The information cannot be generalised beyond the bounds of the cases used, something that is often referred to as 'bounded generalisation'. This means that its value lies in the capacity provided to the readers to make associations between the cases in the research and other cases known to them.

'Generaliseability' in qualitative research is a real notion, and occurs when the readers of the research reports can see and understand how the examples might work in other contexts and sites. They are encouraged then to try this out and, being equipped with information from the existing cases, are in a better position to see possible pitfalls and identify ways of ensuring success.

The kind of research reported through these case studies is excellent for the purpose of illuminating the detail of *how* and *why* questions. It should be noted, however, that when it is stated, as in the first line of the conclusion in the Leatherwood case, to take one example, that Leatherwood shows how the configurations of VET partnerships impact on the effectiveness of VET, it is *not* claimed that this is what happens across the whole site, or that collaborations like this result in positive outcomes everywhere else. What *is* claimed is that, by showing *how*, in effect what is being stated is: 'Positive outcomes from collaborations are possible, and this is how they can be achieved'.

Readers may wish to read the cases in sequence. However, there is no reason why the final synthesis cannot be read as a stand-alone summary of the whole document, using the case studies as required to illustrate aspects of the concluding comments.

Given the above provisos, readers are invited to use the following table to find their way to specific sections of the case studies, the appendices and attachments, that address each of the Research Questions 1 to 7:

Research Questions	Case Study 1: Billabong	Case Study 2: Forrestville	Case Study 3: Rivertown	Case Study 4: Emu Springs	Case Study 5: Lawson	Case Study 6: Bellbird	Case Study 7: Bridgetown	Case Study 8: Highbury	Case Study 9: Leatherwood	Case Study 10: Possum Point
Question 1 What are the changes in regional Australia over approximately the last five years in terms of: • Industry profiles • Employment demands – existing and emerging • Skills profiles • Levels of participation in education and training?	✓							✓		
Question 2 What are the key factors driving these changes (global, national, regional and local)?	✓					✓		✓		
Question 3 What are the different configurations of VET provision occurring and how do they relate to these changes?	✓		✓		✓	✓		✓		✓
Question 4 How and why did the different configurations of VET provision emerge?					✓				✓	✓
Question 5 How do the different configurations of VET provision meet the changing needs of stakeholders?		✓	✓	✓		✓			✓	✓
Question 6 How effective are the different configurations of VET provision in meeting the needs of the stakeholders?		✓	✓	✓			✓		✓	
Question 7 What actions should be taken to improve effectiveness of VET in meeting stakeholders needs in various regions?		✓					✓			

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BILLABONG: The training response to change*

We can be a determined pack of bastards. In the past we usually found ways of doing things ourselves with very little help from governments, either Federal or State, because they'd like to take from Billabong. They don't like to put back. And with the isolation we have become resilient. And being from Billabong we keep our heads down.

A thirty-year-old, third-generation Billabong man

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* **Note:** The authors of this report are indebted to a paper written by Jo Balatti, Ian Falk, Susan Johns and Tony Smith. The paper, *A Regional community's VET response to socioeconomic threat: A case study* was published in the conference papers for the Griffith University conference, Parkroyal, Gold Coast, in December 1999. The paper has been drawn on extensively in this case study, and it is noted that the authors have given their permission for its use in this instance.

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SITE SNAPSHOT

Billabong's, population of 20 963 is declining. In the twenty-year period from 1976 to 1996 , the population fell from approximately 27 500 to 21 000. According to a report on the social and economic consequences of the main industry closure the population is projected to reduce further to 18 800 by the year 2010. The decrease in population however, has not been uniform across all age groups. In the twenty-year period from 1976 to 1996, the proportion of the population over the age of 60 increased (almost 50%) while the proportion of the population in the 10–19 years band dropped.

The site for study also includes Billabong A (population 35), a small town in a neighbouring state 50km west of the main Billabong site, and Billabong B (population 385), 110km south east of Billabong. Once dependent on a single industry, new industries are developing in response to its closure. Billabong is a community in transition, brought about by the closure of this main industry which has sustained the area economically for over 100 years. Defined by National Economics in 1998 as 'a rural type', its predominant employment base now is the retail industry. Billabong demonstrates a strong community spirit with approximately 300 voluntary groups and organisations. Billabong A, a historic railway settlement which suffered a decline in the early 1990s with the closure of the railway, is turning to tourism as a growing source of income. Billabong B has an indigenous population of 40% and the major industry for the area is horticulture.

TAFE is the largest VET provider in the Billabong district but ACE also offers accredited VET courses. A fee-for-service Accredited Vocational Skills Training Centre acts as broker for the Work for the Dole program. All are located in Billabong but service Billabong B and to a lesser extent Billabong A.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS:

A Changes and context

1 What are the changes in regional Australia over approximately the last five years in terms of:

- Industry profiles
- Employment demands — existing and emerging
- Skills profiles
- Levels of participation in education and training?

2 What are the key factors driving these changes (global, national, regional and local)?

B Configurations

3 What are the different configurations of VET provision occurring and how do they relate to these changes?

ISSUES:

Distance, collaboration

Community identity and response to change

Research Question 3 asks, What are the different configurations of VET provision occurring and how do they relate to these changes? The changes referred to are:

- Industry profiles
- Employment demands — existing and emerging
- Skills profiles
- Levels of participation in education and training

This case study addresses this research question by showing how Billabong is configuring its VET partnerships in response to changing industry profiles, and the resulting employment and skill consequences. The case study shows how the levels of participation in VET are directly affected by these dynamics.

The relationship between the changes in a community and the local skills and knowledge base that might assist in the change management processes is the particular issue that arises in this case study of Billabong and its environs. The nature, flexibility and availability in the skill base are important variables in any community's response to change – be that response a positive or negative one, and this case study looks at the role played by vocational education and training in the skills development aspect of community renewal. It becomes clear that the way a community uses its historical identity for future planning is a vital factor in determining the nature of the skills base required, as well as the way to plan for the development of necessary skills. Social and economic changes in many communities in regional Australia have become constants over recent years. This is a case study of Billabong and environs as a regional centre where the changes taking place are dramatic. The declining main industry is undergoing a transformation since The Australian Heritage Commission gave the industry-site interim status on the Register of the National Estate, a list of Australia's premier natural and cultural heritage places. The legacy of Australia's widest and most representative range of industry features and structures, together with a wealth of artefacts including companies' records dating back to the last century, could form the basis of the city's future existence.

So Australia's interest in Billabong is more than in its cultural and historical national value. Australia is now watching how Billabong manages the processes of economic and social change. Cultural transformation is also permeating these processes — community expectations are changing as are the ways it views itself in relation to the rest of the world.

The isolation of Billabong has, until recently, been psychological as well as physical. Hints of past practices and of world-views that still have some currency exist in the vernacular of the area. It doesn't take long for a visitor to learn that many Billabongites continue to call themselves 'A' groupers if they were born in Billabong or 'B' Groupers if they relocated to Billabong. For much of Billabong's history this differentiation has translated into economic and social status. 'A' groupers always had precedence over others in securing positions on the main industry sites. It also doesn't take long for visitors to realise they fall into a third category, that is, people who are 'from away'. Once that is established, interest in exactly where one is from is usually minimal. The insularity has its roots in the historical and economic circumstances of Billabong as much as in its geography. A thirty-year-old, third generation local explains what he feels it means to be from Billabong:

> We can be a determined pack of bastards. In the past we usually found ways of doing things ourselves with very little help from governments, either Federal or State, because they'd like to take from Billabong. They don't like to put back. And with the isolation we have become resilient. And being from Billabong we keep our heads down.

This strong sense of identity and pride was evident in many conversations. However, some of our interviewees also expressed concern with its negative side which, they argued, threatened Billabong's capacity to redefine itself. Critical analysis comes from an interviewee who has observed a community inertia that he feels is explained by past practices:

> The town would wait. If there was a problem, you rang up the unions and said 'I've got a problem', and the union took it on for you, even if it wasn't an employment issue. If you had a town problem, you'd ring up the Council and you'd whinge to them. People would just complain when they needed to, to those two organisations, and they fixed it. They waited until either the union or the Council did something, And most action was born more out of complaint than out of initiative. Those days are gone now, but that mentality is still there.

Resistance to change has also been experienced by some businesses intent on introducing training to their work force. One large hospitality organisation described the difficult transition when management was obliged to implement training in the workplace:

> Well, training here had been just about zero up until the last five years. We got a lot of negative response to start with. You'd put staff notices around and things like that, you'd come down the next day and there'd be everything under the sun written over them, a total disrespect for anything new that was introduced. You know, they have been doing this job for so long why should they be trained? That's been the biggest issue. In the last 5 years we've probably seen half of our staff leave. But the younger people that have come through are willing to be trained. So after about four and a half years it's become very positive. And now they are begging for their training.

To the vocational education and training community nationally, these sets of conditions make Billabong invaluable in terms of studying the role that VET is playing in response to change processes. Billabong is already using VET resources in many initiatives both to support the growth of alternative industries and to help protect the social wellbeing of its members. For community leaders, VET practitioners and policy makers alike, this case study provides insights into how, in a time of unprecedented change, this community is producing new VET products to meet new demands. It shows how it is harnessing the existing strengths of the community, such as its networks and strong community spirit, to form other networks with norms and values that actively foster training and learning. As well as describing ways in which the community is already benefiting from these initiatives, we also identify some factors that restrict the potential of vocational education to contribute more fully to the transformational process.

TAFE provision responds to change

A useful barometer for monitoring change in recent years is the local college of TAFE. Now a campus of the regional TAFE, it has serviced Billabong for over 100 years and continues to be its biggest provider of vocational education and training. Times have changed however. a University in the region now offers distance education courses and private providers have started coming to town and becoming competition.

TAFE, however, is still the biggest provider in the area. Participation in TAFE at Billabong (2.3% of population) is higher than at most of the study sites, but lower than participation across the State. Because of limited student numbers, more composite classes are being established at TAFE to increase economic viability.

Changes in course offerings have reflected the changes in industry and demography. Apprentice intake in the trade areas has dropped dramatically with some trades such as refrigeration having no apprentices at all. In contrast, courses in tourism and hospitality are well supported, as are art classes. A field that has recently attracted strong interest is welfare, which seems to reflect the city's increasing elderly population. When an associate diploma of welfare was offered for the first time this year, 48 students enrolled, four times the expected number. Over the last five years however, computer courses have been highest in demand. Demand has also increased for more advanced IT classes and TAFE is now offering diplomas with courses linking to a university degree in information technology. This is relevant in that it shows the way TAFE has responded to identified needs.

Notwithstanding the declining population, TAFE enrolments this year have increased by approximately 20%. This was attributed to a need for formal skill recognition.

> People have been working in their job for the last x number of years with no formal recognition of their skills. Now all of a sudden, they're thinking 'If I leave here I've got nothing'. That's the thing I'm finding most in the comments people are making. They want to know how they can use the skills they've got, how they can be accredited for something. They want a hard copy to say that they've got these skills, which will be recognised by everybody else.

The following vignettes illustrate the town's response to changing identity and the role of long standing affinity groups within this process. The second vignette illustrates the importance of relevance and professionally delivered, short, sharp courses have an important role to play in turning alienated participant attitudes to training around and the importance of building external and internal networks in building VET alliances. Vignette three informs us that a sense of community and learning the skills of collaboration is an important factor in the success of future collaborative arrangements.

Vignette 1: Industry as Heritage project creates new training needs

Redefining Billabong's identity as a national cultural heritage destination

Symbolically, the main industry site is the core of Billabong. For the community, many of the remaining industry structures and ex-workers' cottages — are iconic landmarks. Physically and historically, it is the industrial heart of the city.

In a literal sense, the Industry as Heritage project is redefining a spent industry site into a cultural heritage workplace. A grant of $4.625 million from the Federation Fund last year is being used to develop this resource as a national education centre and an international tourist destination. As an education centre, the Industry as Heritage Project site aims to attract primary, secondary and tertiary students on field trips, work experience and placements. With respect to tourism, the project site, which has been open to the public for over a year, employs retrained ex- industry workers to conduct organised tours. The project currently employs seven full-time staff in administration and other roles. A volunteer force is also contributing to the development of the site.

For the community, the Industry as Heritage Project is perceived as a 'shot in the arm'. It is believed that it is big enough, and ambitious enough, to make a significant contribution to the momentum required to establish a new strong identity and economy. For vocational education and training the implications of this project are far reaching and in many ways, signal the new demands emerging in Billabong generally.

New training needs and new ways of sourcing training

These emerging demands are being met in a variety of ways. For example, ex- industry workers are learning to be tourist guides, curators, oral historians, maintenance workers, researchers, functions coordinators and administrators. The seven current staff undertook a career transition course in conservation and curatorship followed by a traineeship in arts administration. As there was no accredited trainer for this traineeship in Billabong, a trainer from the State's capital city managed the traineeships.

Although personal practical knowledge of the now spent major industry is invaluable, both management and staff acknowledge the need for additional training. Billabong already offers some of the necessary training. However, the specialised training required in conservation, archiving, and restoration is not available locally.

Catalyst for building a learning community

As a community owned and operated project, the aim of 'Industry as Heritage' is to contribute to the community and not to compete with existing businesses. Therefore, a strength of the Industry as Heritage project is its capacity to draw together existing agencies and businesses to form groups that, through shared learning and cooperation, reap individual and community gain. Although this forms the tentative basis for trust, the manager explained that time and many ongoing interactions are required to build sufficient trust to act collectively.

The example described here concerns the development of relationships with other main industry-related businesses and the process of learning to work collectively to increase revenue from tourism.

Almost all of the main industry-related tourist attractions are one- or two- people businesses set up by ex-main industry workers. Although extremely knowledgeable about their specific industry, these operators may not have the resources, especially the time, to develop their knowledge of markets and tourism or to consider ways of expanding their businesses. Until the Industry as Heritage Project began calling meetings between the operators to discuss collaborative marketing strategies, each business had been working independently of the others and in relative isolation. Now opportunities have been generated that promote shared learning:

They very rarely talk to the others, even though they know each other. But we've found as we've started to talk to them, to bring them together, that we're starting to see more sharing of ideas and sharing of information. If they're supported by a mechanism which brings them in with the rest of the group rather than individually, out there fighting for themselves, we've noticed that there's an interest and a change.

'Industry as Heritage' represents new needs, demands and practices in formal and informal learning and the project's commitment to fostering learning is clear:

In this town, we see ourselves as a catalyst to either creating a project or a course. Whether we deliver it, it doesn't necessarily matter. But if we can create a long-term educative and training initiative in town, we'll go for it.

'Industry as Heritage' is a common-purpose group, undertaking the work of building linkages and collaborative arrangements through ongoing activity.

Vignette 2: Volunteers volunteer to learn

Billabong has been very rich in community spirit, community groups and community assets. Many would say that this has been due in great measure to its wealth, its isolation and its socialist heritage. Kennedy (1978, p. 177) argues that 'the fierce collectivism and the Samaritan generosity of the [Billabong]' were forged early this century when main industry workers fought and won bitter and costly battles with hostile environments, neglectful governments and often unscrupulous bosses. Although the wealth has now greatly diminished, volunteer numbers and community spirit are, for the moment, still strong. According to the community development officer, there are 4000 volunteers, almost 20% of the population, who do unpaid work for the 300 groups that support cultural, sporting, welfare, education and self-help activities in the community. However, many groups face a decreasing and aging membership.

Furthermore, many groups are suffering from what attendees at a Volunteer Week function called 'brain drain'. The community stock of expertise and leadership has been flowing out of Billabong as industries, businesses and government services have closed. Consequently, groups are facing a leadership crisis with those in executive positions being unskilled or positions unfilled. For some, the closure of the last main industry outlet threatens a fatal haemorrhage.

An additional challenge to this sector is the tension between an increasing legal requirement for training and community resistance to training. The resulting confusion and dismay felt by some volunteers who, until recently had worked for their favourite groups without 'bits of paper', was expressed by one of our interviewees, a man who has been a volunteer for years. He described how his wife was rejected for volunteer work:

My missus that lives with me, she — now that the kids are all grown up — she wants to get out and do a bit of community work. She wanted to go up to the nursing home as a domestic volunteer. But she's got to have a bit of paper to say she has got a First Aid Certificate. And they want a car licence and she has never driven a car in her life. So they have lost a volunteer worker. It's wrong. I can't see why you have to have all these bits of paper.

To help the community recruit and retain volunteers, the City Council has implemented a far-reaching initiative called the *Volunteer Project*. Skills development of community group members is one of its major goals. Two of the strategies that the Council has adopted are the presentation of workshops and the staging of a national volunteer conference.

Workshops and 'sampler' courses: Agents of change

Workshops on management plans, public relations, legal issues, public relations, grant applications and recruitment strategies are advertised through the community newsletter. Presenters are sourced from professional organisations, community service clubs, government bodies and training providers. Most workshops are free of charge and last from an hour to, at most, a day. Upon completion of the workshops, participants receive a certificate with details of the course from Billabong's Adult Community Education provider.

The short timeframe and practical content of the workshops are deliberate. The community development officer explained that volunteers do not attend longer or more formal courses for a number of reasons. For many the whole notion of training is intimidating. For some, it is a foreign concept entirely, while for others, it is associated with a classroom setting that they last experienced 50 or 60 years ago. Others again are not interested in completing certificate courses because they only want specific knowledge to deal with a specific issue in their community group.

The workshops, however, serve more than a utilitarian purpose. The community development officer believes the 'sampler courses' are gradually helping people change their attitudes toward training. Once experienced, participants almost always acknowledge the courses are very good value and the community development officer has observed that some volunteers are now 'getting the bug to do training'. In turning around attitudes to training, short, professionally organised and run courses appear to be an important factor.

Volunteer conference: Infusion of new ideas into community

Last year the community development officer, together with thirty members of community groups, organised and hosted a national conference catering to the interests of volunteers. The project plan was sent to universities and government bodies seeking feedback. As a result, a partnership ensued with a university which attached one of its conferences to the one at Billabong.

The purpose of the biennial conference is, in fact, twofold. Firstly, as the community development officer explains, it injects new ideas into the community while, at the same time, it provides feedback to the community:

The idea of the conference was, well, let's set up a mechanism that every two years we get this infusion of ideas. And we give the opportunity to the locals here to get to a conference. Unfortunately the grass roots people here don't get that opportunity. So what happens if you bring the conference here? I think what happens is that the *outsiders affirm, they actually say 'Billabong, you are doing wonderful things'. I think that's important, when we hear that from outsiders, that we are headed in the right direction. Also, we pick up ideas on what is going on, what is happening elsewhere. And we develop networks, so that we have got links outside. We can ring people up and say 'Listen, we are thinking about setting up a program for boys in Billabong. You know, what's your experience? Can you send us some information?'.*

The second purpose is to draw groups together for a common goal. Although there are many community groups in Billabong, past wealth, both in terms of money and membership, did not produce the same need to collaborate or share that is required today. Undertaking activity forges new networks, both internal to the community and external to the community. The Volunteer Project aims at fostering links between organisations. This is important, as links between organisations in Billabong did not appear to be as extensive as in some other sites.

The enthusiasm generated by last year's conference prompted a resolution from the volunteers to have their own local conference on alternate years. As a result, a partnership between a local Rotary Club, the Adult Community Education provider and the Billabong City Council was formed to organise this year's local conference which was attended by approximately 100 delegates.

In a very real sense, this vignette shows two key points. First, it shows that the networking and shared values that the events promote bring into use the human capital skills that already exist. Second, because the skills required are related to the purpose of the event, they are therefore valued, and useful to all concerned. The social capital thus promotes the relevance and confidence in existing skills, as well as identifying what skills are required for the immediate and longer-term development of the projects in hand.

Vignette 3: VET providers work with the community

Here we give two examples that show how the city's VET providers enhance social and economic outcomes of VET to the community through collaboration. The first example is a VET provider collaboration that is facilitated by the Billabong Regional Consultative Committee. The second example tells how one provider, TAFE, collaborated with local organisations to satisfactorily meet their respective needs.

The Education and Training Sub-Committee

For several years the VET providers of Billabong have been meeting on a monthly basis. Having begun as a focus group, they are now the Education and Training Sub-Committee of the Billabong Regional Consultative Committee. The purpose of the group is to enhance the value of VET to the community through information sharing, networking and collective action. Their work is supported by the secretarial and administrative assistance supplied by the Regional Consultative Committee.

Adult Learners Week is an annual project of the Sub-Committee but in the last two years they have also been involved in some successful lobbying. One example is promoting VET in schools.

When VET was introduced in one of the local high schools, the participation rate was low. General community resistance was one problem. Many parents, students and teachers, did not consider that, for some students, VET studies were more valuable than mainstream academic subjects. Educating employers to become involved and provide work placement was another difficulty. A third problem that the Sub-Committee identified was the lack of resources in schools to actually organise and monitor work placements. As a result of the Sub-Committee's discussions, the Regional Consultative Committee made an application to the Australian Student Training Foundation to employ a workplace coordinator and marketer. Funding was accessed and arrangements were made with the local Chamber of Commerce to provide office accommodation. For two years a workplace coordinator has been supporting the efforts of the one high school that has VET and she has also been promoting the VET-in-Schools program in other schools and in the community.

The Education and Training Sub-Committee attributes its effectiveness to its ability 'to take some issues and possible solutions from a concept stage to actually doing something about it'. When we asked what made the group effective, members stated that cooperation, good will and maintaining a community perspective were key characteristics of how the group operates. A sense of community appears to be a critical factor in the success of this common-purpose group.

TAFE and community organisations

Local VET providers have developed a wide range of collaborative interactions and partnerships to meet the needs of course delivery. The town's economic downturn has also prompted some of these collaborations. This final case is an example of a collaboration between the Council and TAFE which was brought about by economic necessity on the one hand, and training need on the other.

For want of a project to provide work experience, TAFE faced the possibility of losing one of its preapprenticeship building courses for a class of Indigenous students. At the same time, the residents of a Council-owned retirement village were requesting a recreation room for meetings, celebrations and other social activity. At that stage, the Council couldn't afford to meet these needs because of its strong commitment to other works at the village. Upon hearing of the Council's dilemma, TAFE proposed that they contribute labour to the project. Council accepted the offer and the project was completed. A Council spokesperson summarised the benefits of the project to the three parties involved:

It was a win/win for everybody. First of all, the people in the village got themselves a recreation room that they really love and that they use a lot, and they're very proud of it. Secondly, the people at TAFE got an opportunity to get real work experience building a real building rather than just a mock-up on the TAFE site. And I guess the younger Aboriginal people got an insight into the problems of older people. But also in reverse, it showed the older people a more positive side of young people. And the Council got the benefit of a building that is now an asset to its retirement village. We were very pleased with the outcomes of the project.

Since this joint venture, TAFE has collaborated with other organisations in practical building projects. Learning the skills of collaboration is an important factor for future collaborative arrangements.

Discussion

The upsides

A complex community with a rich history, Billabong is undergoing intense economic, social and cultural change. It is remote, decreasing in size and ageing. It has high unemployment and an underdeveloped industry base, as a result of historically having been a single industry town, now closing down it operations. It is also a priceless, cultural and historical national treasure. Above all, it is a community that is responding strongly and proactively to the challenge of renewal.

These factors are irrevocably changing the presence of VET in the community. In the business and volunteer sectors, there are demands for new skills and knowledge (e.g. tourism, cultural heritage, management planning and public relations and so on) and for new ways of interacting and collaborating that are constituting new formal and informal learning practices. New networks, new norms and values are generating learning opportunities that had once been limited or even non-existent. Vignette 1 illustrates how the Industry as Heritage Project has facilitated networking and collaboration amongst local tourist operators, who are now working together for the first time. Within the training sector itself, collaborations within industry, across industries and across different public sectors are contributing to the value of VET in Billabong, such as the Volunteer project and collaboration between TAFE and Council. Vignette 3 illustrates the discarding of training that is no longer of value and the gradual rejection of attitudes and beliefs that inhibit learning. As this study has shown, new courses, new learning settings and a new interest in learning are producing welcomed economic and social outcomes.

Evident is the collapse of the physical and intellectual insularity that had held Billabong captive for many years. Billabong is reaching out across the community and across the desert. Through leadership initiatives, learning and training opportunities are being sought 'from away'. Networks are being established with communities outside Billabong; new ideas and skills are entering the local community, and people are bringing back what they are learning elsewhere. Vignette 2 portrays this, by explaining how ideas from outside Billabong are being injected into the community as a result of the Volunteers Conference; the accessing of external trainers to provide knowledge and skills for developing industries and accessing of funding to implement VET in schools. In fact, the dimension of externality is critical to interactions that produce social capital (Falk & Kilpatrick 2000). Taking account of external information (including networks), and acting on it, works for the common good. External networking also helps communities relate and adjust to broader social changes. Without the dimension of externality, closed communities have a greater likelihood of perpetuating local prejudices. It is the dimension of externality that delineates social capital from a view of it as simply another term for social cohesion or social solidarity.

Constraints

Notwithstanding these efforts there are constraints preventing Billabong from maximising its value from vocational education and training. First, its small size and its remoteness discourage local provision of the specialised skills it requires to be of international standard in terms of tourism, hospitality and cultural heritage restoration. The need is critical but the cost to access that sort of training is high and therefore not available to most. Second, not all the community has come to trust in these new ways of 'doing VET' and in the new interrelationships. For example, resistance to VET in schools, the dismay at needing 'bits of paper' (Vignette 2) to participate as a volunteer. It is interesting that a community with this history needs to reinterpret what it means to act collectively. For new practices to take root, time and experience are required. This constitutes what is called the dimension of historicity (Falk & Harrison 1998) in the production of social capital.

Time and experience, combined with the right kinds of planning and purposeful experiences, lead to the development of trust. Trust produces confidence, a critical ingredient in the vocational learning process, confirmed in the project from which this case study is drawn.

VET resources are a stock of knowledge and skills and a stock of networks with their associated norms and values. The extent to which they convert to human capital or social capital respectively, depends on the value that they have to that community. The *relevance* and the *accessibility* of those stocks to the members of the community are the two most important criteria for ascertaining their value. If we reconsider the vignettes described in this paper using these two dimensions alone, it is clear that we cannot separate social capital from human capital in considering the value that VET has to a community. Networks, norms, trust and values determine the distribution of social goods in a community, including the human capital. VET can only be fully effective, with participation maximised, if both human and social capital are developed together.

Examples have been selected so far to show the upside of this community's collaborative activity over VET. There are indeed some excellent examples that illustrate the point that community and VET need to work together to establish and build their required skills base, including skills for establishing collaborative arrangements and working collaboratively.

However, there are some downsides evident in this case of slow-to-respond VET systems whose structures and ethos seem to hinder the community's active engagement for the forces of change.

The downsides

While this case study shows the power and benefits of collaboration and partnerships in managing the changes, there is evidence of only limited collaborative activity, mostly involving community-based organisations. So while Billabong is rich in community spirit and networks generally there is very limited collaborative activity evident in terms of VET. Very few groups collaborated with training providers and similarly, most training providers interviewed did not collaborate as part of a group to deliver and/or plan training. The strongest links in the Billabong site appear to be driven by community based activity connected with local business and industry. Workplace Coordinators and Vocational Officers are perceived as increasingly important links between training providers and prospective employers.

Information technology, in terms of training courses available and method of delivery, seems to have had little impact on Billabong since 1999. Very few community learners interviewed had accessed the Internet in a monthly period. Limited staff and student numbers have driven changes in delivery mode but these are towards amalgamating face-to-face classes rather than towards online or other electronic delivery. This is contrary to current policy strategies. Six of the 18 organisations interviewed from the Billabong site reported new providers delivering VET through/for their organisation. Quantitative data indicates a small increase in VET courses and in the range of topics and training packages, with the main reason for this attributed to demand by both employers and trainees. A new apprenticeship Centre has opened in Billabong and the local high school is now an RTO.

Conclusion

This case study has shown that vocational education and training can play an integral role in the economic, social and cultural redefinition of this community. VET's contributions are directly related to the collaborative networks between the VET providers and the business and community organisations. That is, successful management of change processes depends on the extent to which the community is able to draw from the resources defined as human capital and social capital. This case has shown that the community's capacity to capitalise on these resources depends on the nature of the resource, its relevance, flexibility and accessibility.

The process of transition from a remote main industry community to an internationally renowned destination has begun. Billabong's strength lies in those intra- and inter-community networks that are making Billabong a community that is learning, although the networks and collaborative conditions for achieving that state are still underdeveloped.

2

FORRESTVILLE : Vocational learning and cultural diversity

I think there is very little collaboration between training providers and I think that comes down to the way that the funding is being offered. It seems to be a competitive thing that if [a private provider gives information to a public provider or vice versa] we are giving them the edge into our market, and so we are very careful.

Apprenticeship and traineeship
learning support officer for TAFE

SITE SNAPSHOT

This site comprises the City of Forrestville (population 116 392), the smaller centre of Forrestville A, 32km west of Forrestville (population 3900) and the town of Forrestville B (population 6800) another 30km further west. The region has a range of cultural and ethnic groups including a large population of Indigenous peoples in Australia (almost 10% are either Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islanders). The population of Forrestville has the highest growth rate among the study sites (+37%, compared to a national average of 20%). At the 1996 Census of Population the unemployment rate in region was almost 8%.

Within Forrestville, retail and tourism-based industry provide the primary basis of employment. Tourism has replaced sugar as the major industry in the region. There has also been considerable growth in hospitality and cultural and recreational services. Government services and the wholesale and retail trade industries employ more than 50% of the workforce. Outside of Forrestville, agriculture forms the predominant basis of employment. One single commodity accounts for 41% of the agricultural production, however, in the year 2000 there has been a huge decline in the industry due to a downturn in world prices and out-of-season weather patterns. The collapse of another major industry and the restructuring of the dairy industry is having widespread effects. The Shire has the highest unemployment rate in the region.

The focus for this site is on VET for people from a non-English speaking background. There are four State high schools and seven private schools in Forrestville offering education to Year 12. An active school-based apprenticeship and traineeship scheme allows students in Years 11 and 12 to benefit from hands-on experience in a real workplace without having to leave school. In 1987 a University opened a campus on the outskirts of the city, and today 3200 students study a variety of courses there. According to the 1996 Census over 41% of the people in the region held post-school qualifications, 24% of these had a bachelor degree or higher and 59% a vocational qualification.

The Regional Institute of TAFE has seven campuses spread over the area. Forrestville B alone has over 100 registered training organisations.

Forrestville B is serviced by one State high school and one private school to Year 12, a TAFE campus, and numerous private VET providers. A new agricultural college, located just outside the town, offers live-in accommodation for 16 students and offers courses in farm and natural resource management, animal husbandry and tropical agriculture. The high school runs a VET program, including traineeships and apprenticeships utilising a variety of training providers from within and outside of the region, including the state's capital. Some apprenticeships however, require weekly travel to Forrestville for training, and this is an added cost for families.

Forrestville A's high school opened in 1998 and is planning a vocational education and training program. Some Year 11 and 12 students still travel 30-minute to attend high schools in Forrestville. One Forrestville B-based private training provider has an office in Forrestville A. The two Indigenous organisations also provide non-accredited VET.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS:

B	***Configurations***
5	How do the different configurations of VET provision meet the changing needs of stakeholders?
C	***Effectiveness***
6	How effective are the different configurations of VET provision in meeting the needs of the stakeholders?
7	What actions should be taken to improve effectiveness of VET in meeting stakeholders' needs in various regions?

ISSUES:

Quality learning, literacy and numeracy

Vocational learning and cultural diversity

The data from the Forrestville site provides some graphic examples of the ways in which supply and demand meet at the grassroots level. These local dynamics of VET illustrate the nature of 'quality' in vocational learning, and carry some lessons for future national consistency benchmarking. The conclusion of the case study sets out some principles of managing quality through benchmarking VET, and therefore this case study addresses Research Questions 5 and 6, and especially 7, *What actions should be taken to improve effectiveness of VET in meeting stakeholders' needs in various regions?*

While most training needs of the major industries such as tourism and retail are well serviced in Forrestville, the region sources training from the south of the State to meet its other training needs for example, operating heavy equipment.

In this region there is a large amount of accredited and non-accredited training available to Indigenous people. Much of this training has been designed and developed by Indigenous people themselves. This attempts to meet the demand in the community for culturally appropriate and sensitive courses such as health and landcare management programs. The current trend indicates that the demand is higher for short courses which can assist in personal development and functional work skills rather than long intensive programs aimed specifically at career development.

Quality vocational learning: Supply and demand

In this case study, the issue of quality is a recurring theme. The case study provides examples of tensions between meeting local demands at the same time as meeting the requirements of national standards. The nature of quality in vocational education and training can be seen from two perspectives: that of the supply side and that of the demand side. One of the concerns of supply-side quality is the provision of simple-to-use yet multi-functional national consistency measures for the VET accreditation system. This is facilitated through benchmarking Registered Training Organisations (RTOs) via the Australian Recognition Framework (ARF). The ARF benchmarks have been revised, and the new set of Standards and Evidence Requirements is close to publication.

The responsibility for the provision of national consistency measures exists in a reciprocal relationship with the demand side's (clients) use of these consistency measures. If the measures are accepted and used 'on the ground' then it can be assumed that they fill the needs of the local communities and regions that together make up the nation. If they are not taken up, then either regulations are put in place to ensure adoption, or new policy strategies are indicated and drafted.

Where the rubber meets the road: the meeting of quality and local need

Quality as national policy strategies meeting local needs

Good quality vocational learning is not explicitly noted often in the data, but an internalised set of benchmarks for quality is often assumed in people's comments. For example, there is an overall perception that training needs to be based on local needs and that training imported from other environments is often inappropriate. One element of quality, therefore, is assumed by the participants to relate to a match between local vocational learning needs and the supply-side offering. This point is made manifest in citations referring to nationally accredited customised courses, where the course has been tailored to meet the clients' needs. An example of such a course is one tailored to the needs of 'youth at risk' which was accredited and funded for five years by. The course incorporated appropriate literacy and numeracy measures at the same time as the 'content'. Such a success is an example of the appropriateness of national strategic measures being interpreted and used to fill local needs. In these cases, the policy rubber can be said to hit the regional VET roads.

There was a perception that national Training Packages were not as yet meeting local needs. The Training Packages were applied to training students. This was made explicit on occasions: some Training Packages were noted to require high levels of literacy, and at other times they were reported not to contain culturally specific material for Indigenous groups.

Another aspect of meeting local needs is whether the national frameworks and implementation strategies can be adapted or stretched to meet local training needs. For example, insufficient literacy programs was a recurring perceived barrier to quality learning throughout the area. In addition a need for culturally sensitive tutors and material for the Indigenous population was an overall demand.

Multiple measure of quality

One commonly noted issue emerging from the Forrestville data is the quality vocational learning. It is perceived as being multi-dimensional, and not captured by one measure alone, such as filling training places (OVET, forthcoming). There is dissatisfaction with elements of student support, as well as matters of the professionalism of training staff. For example, an employee of a public provider said that it 'had lost its way from being primarily an educational agency to a competitive business organisation' which, it was claimed, diminished outcomes for the students and compromised staff professionalism.

Resource Issues

Difficulties for remote vocational learners were noted in accessing mentoring support, as well as obtaining required items of equipment such as power-tools and computers. There was evidence that training was difficult when people were required to leave their employment to attend courses, a staffing resource issue for enterprises, especially small business. For RTOs, it was reported to be too costly to have a trainer go to a remote area for a small number of trainees. It was also suggested that computers provide the technical side of training thus reducing the time required for trainees to be off-site. One training provider made their own CDs to provide training to manual workers. However, it was necessary for the workers to come into the office to access a computer. Electronic learning materials required sufficient literacy and numeracy skills to learn independently, as well as computer literacy skills.

However, and perhaps not unsurprisingly, there was a general need expressed for more funding for a greater range and quality of courses. Of some surprise is that the need is identified in areas of specific local content as opposed to areas of generic national content. Filling specific local needs is possible under the existing national frameworks. The solution to the problem is, however, often perceived to be hindered by competition policy. In thin markets this often means outside organisations, unfamiliar with specific local needs, winning tenders to deliver training.

Competition and thin markets

The specific issue of the effects of competition in regional Australia's usually 'thin' markets, where a low population base means a paucity of choice, needs addressing specifically. It is seen by many to be a root cause of the lack of both quality and variety of training provided.

The issue has, of course, proponents on both sides of the debate. Some leaders within the traditional providers see the public choice model (competition policy) as beneficial in giving the community more control over VET provision. It forces providers to collaborate with the community it serves to ensure they provide a relevant and sought after 'product'. This view sees competition policy as ensuring more collaborative, community-oriented leadership:

> In the past, vocational education and training has been very much directed by the providers as opposed to the client and so you don't necessarily have a good match between what has been offered and what people are wanting in terms of training and education.... At the end of the day the individual who is making decisions about where they are going to access education and training is the consumer. They are the users and they will make conscious choices on the basis of value for money, relevancy... The client or the student or whoever would want to be in control on that decision that they make about their selection. [It's] about the provider being in control of the way they deliver, and making conscious decisions about adapting their delivery to suit the purchaser.

A TAFE learning support officer commented less favourably about competition's effect on resource-saving collaborative measures:

> I think there is very little collaboration between training providers and I think that comes down to the way that the funding is being offered. It seems to be a competitive thing that if [a private provider gives information to a public provider OR vice versa] we are giving them the edge into our market, and so we are very careful.

An Indigenous provider put the same issue in a different way:

> But now it is so fiercely competitive and at times quite nasty which [does] not encourage collaboration.... The focus is not on meeting community needs. Their focus is primarily on getting their part of the action which means tendering — which means cutting corners and scaling back all support services which shouldn't be scaled back.

Either way, whether competition policy is reviled or embraced, there is the perception of a great need for leadership to collaborate with the community, for VET provision to be community driven and for community participants to be given legitimacy as equal partners in the process of VET provision. In this one site, for example, there were strong views expressed for and against competition, and this is taken to originate from the differing circumstances surrounding each case. The two issues (backwash effect, and cultural diversity and online learning) and the vignette that follow, illustrate the impacts of competition policy.

Backwash effect: Evaluation criteria impacts on training quality

Evaluation criteria that concentrate on outputs, not quality of the learning process, impact on the quality of that process. In the assessment and evaluation field, there is a relationship between assessment or evaluation of a program and the content of that program called the *backwash effect*. This term refers to the fact that the nature of the assessment or evaluation in a course of study will affect the practice in the classroom to orient the teaching to the content of the assessment. The concept is also applicable in the national VET area, where the nature of the data collected and used to evaluate the outcomes affects in significant ways the quality of learning programs 'on the ground', namely training.

In one example, a private college explained that it was much harder to obtain funding for long-term quality courses because government bodies pushed short-term courses in order to create a more positive statistical picture.

> …it is all competency based assessment but in theory you can push them out the door in six months, not a problem, but what are their employment chances?… we have a 95% employment rate … and that is always one of our selling points…. We need courses that are going to be full twelve months as a certificate III... Now the average push obviously from the powers of be for short term course… Student contact hours and numbers coming through the shorter the course the better from their stats, but it doesn't do much from an employment point of view… We are under a lot of pressure because our courses are too long but no one else can get the employment rate that we have.

Accurate or not, comments such as these point to a perception of quality as including a capacity to work with clients for more continuous periods than short courses allow. That is a perception of quality includes the need to work with clients over time. Policy favours funding of short courses as opposed to developing a relationship with the client over time, where learning issues can be addressed to better meet individual and/or community need.

Cultural diversity and online learning

There are undoubted benefits provided by online and flexible delivery in terms of accessing vocational learning. Never before has information and global expertise been as readily available for as many. However, on the ground, there are a number of references made to the inappropriateness of online or flexible delivery for all students. Reasons why people experienced problems were: lack of computer skills, preference for face-to-face learning, inadequate literacy skills, being accustomed to traditional classroom environment, unable to negotiate courses and lack of confidence. Indigenous people in general prefer face-to-face and practical rather than theoretical learning. Particular age groups (middle-aged) together with migrants also experience difficulties with online learning. In one case, due to the location and access restrictions on computers for security reasons, online delivery could not be accessed by students in a correctional facility. In these instances in-house or correspondence courses were made available. The nature of flexible delivery has also made it difficult for trainers to provide students with individualised attention and assistance with literacy and numeracy or customisation and application to on-the-job circumstances, for example. As a result, many respondents talked about the need to provide support for people involved in flexible learning programs.

Discussion: Local collaborative structures as facilitators of quality VET

To manage a diverse socio-economic and cultural region and cater for the local needs requires particular qualities in the VET dynamics. There are examples in this case study that illustrate possible ways of assuring VET quality, and they revolve around the manner in which various local collaborative structures manage their business.

The example of an economic development corporation shows how VET outcomes are enhanced not through chance, but through deliberate collaborative strategies. In Forrestville B, the central organisation is the [regional name] Economic Development Corporation (TEDC) which has a strong emphasis on developing collaborative projects rather than just networking:

> … this region has always had extremely good networks, but what they haven't done with networks is collaborate. So networks are OK in that everybody knows everybody and that's their strength. But they hadn't gone the next step and we have been busily doing that over that last five years. That collaboration, collaborative networks are obviously the way to go and this region like every other region in Australia I suppose has suffered very badly from parochialism, we think we have just about broken that down at least at an organisational level.

The TEDC has energetic and visionary leadership which emphasises practical achievements on the ground:

> … the staff are generally oriented to project delivery, and right from the start we decided that we would do a minimum of strategic development and strategic planning because we tend to feel a little ill in the stomach at the thought of producing large documents. Our focus has always been, if we are going to improve the economy, our focus is to develop hard in those commercial projects that will produce commercial outcomes for the region and that's the way we are going to improve the economy.

These economic outcomes do not happen on their own. They are the results of developing networks of collaboration, and networks of networks. In other words, build a strong community and strong economic outcomes may follow. The TEDC leadership also emphasises leadership by each individual person within the organisation, seeing this as a better way to manage multiple projects.

> You see we, as an organisation look …I've taken a quite deliberate decision long ago — that we have been non-hierarchical. [A]ll the staff's skills work as a team and we deliberately push the decision making in the organisation out to the fringes of it, which can be a risky strategy. But it gets a lot more done, so most of our project staff have their own management committees. And for their projects they report to the management committees and they run reasonably independently. And myself as Manager — I provide the glue between all the projects and the co- ordination.

A number of other organisations, private and community based, are active in VET provision in Forrestville B. Competitive imperatives inhibit collaboration for private providers in some instances, while in others collaboration occurs as a way of making the most of available resources. There are both negative and positive perceptions about private provision of VET. There is a strong emphasis in remote areas for VET provision to be developed through consultation with the community to best meet their needs. Leadership must be from within the community. Local leadership and initiatives need support so outside/government assistance needs to be aimed at resourcing and facilitating local initiatives. Top-down solutions are resisted and rarely succeed.

> ….it's not really happening because I think that we are often trying to import our training from environments outside the [local] environment. The courses that we deliver are often pitched at too high a level for some of the [trainees] here: that's very common with people from remote communities… They need some kind of special literacy course, and such things can be done. It simply means that we have to tap into the need more than what's available and where we can deliver it.

Linkages and networks that bridge to other communities-of-common-interest are evident:

> We have strong links with Aboriginal and Islander groups outside who are feeding into programs so the ownership of the program is right from the top, right to the bottom. And we are trying to find out the specific content that will work in this program. I don't want to simply grab a similar program from [somewhere else], bring it up here, start teaching up here because while that program may have some guidelines for us, it won't work for our client group so we will have to develop it ourselves.

VET is seen as instrumental to providing a pathway to real outcomes through networks which build marginalised peoples' self-efficacy and confidence – in this case, the views of a Correctional Services Officer:

> I would just like to express strong support for the vocational training approach to rehabilitation. …I feel that people who have training …will have self esteem ….The people gain self esteem not through being told they should, but through success and demonstrated abilities. [T]he ability to earn a living and keep busy will simply [follow from] that, so I think that vocational training is very much to the fore in a corrections environment.

For this case study, the importance of meeting diverse local vocational learning needs is an important issue related to assuring quality VET. What are the various aspects of meeting needs that have emerged in this case study?

- Local providers are perceived to understand and meet local needs. External providers often do not appreciate local circumstances and specific needs, barriers and enhancers to learning;
- Collaboration between providers is a means of addressing issues of costs incurred through providing training to distant locations and where numbers are limited. It also assists in better meeting local need;
- A long-term relationship with providers is perceived as beneficial, yet the demand is for short, sharp delivery. A long-term relationship leads to providers developing an understanding of needs and meeting these in a variety of ways;
- Successful on-line delivery requires high levels of support to appropriately meet individual and community needs.

A needs-based quality learning model would need to focus on the vocational learning experience. Such a model of assessing quality vocational learning would integrate the assumptions about quality vocational learning explored earlier in the case study and listed above. The model has four resource components whose quality would need to be assured:

1. Resources of the learner (social and cultural, learning styles and preferences, literacy, English language and numeracy);
2. Resources related to the learning interactions (including the duration and intensity; the mode: e.g., online or face-to-face);
3. Human resources such as the professionalism of the training staff;
4. Infrastructural resources supplied to the context of operation (remoteness, policy prescriptions such as competition and national evaluation criteria, RTO organisation's structure and ethos e.g., 'managerialism', funding, equipment, spaces for learning to occur, localised partnerships, leadership and collaborative structures);

Quality vocational learning will therefore be auditable by evaluating the degree to which diverse local vocational learning needs are met within a framework of national consistency measures.

Conclusion

The importance of meeting diverse local vocational learning needs effectively is the overriding important issue to emerge at this site. What are the various aspects of the needs-meeting model that can be identified from this case study? There are four dimensions:

1. Resource needs of the learner (social and cultural, learning styles and preferences, literacy, English language and numeracy);
2. Resource needs related to the learning interactions (including the duration and intensity; the mode: e.g., on-line or face-to-face);
3. Human resource needs such as the professionalism of the training staff;

4. Infrastructural resource needs supplied to the context of operation (remoteness, policy prescriptions such as competition and national evaluation criteria, RTO organisation's structure and ethos e.g., 'managerialism', funding, equipment, spaces for learning to occur, localised partnerships, leadership and collaborative structures).

Collaboration is sometimes seen as impeding effective competition. Competition is reported to have its strengths and weakness where there are thin markets. On the positive side, competition has been reported to break a local stranglehold on a thin market segment. It is, however, very frequently reported to deplete already short resources, create bitterness and division in otherwise cohesive communities and result in a smaller selection of courses. Whether local circumstances have benefited from competition to break a local stranglehold on a local market segment, or whether it has had ill-effects, competition *has the potential* to have positive or negative outcomes. The important point for policy is that it should not be regarded as an either/or situation. Competition can exist side-by-side with collaboration if there are appropriate cross-sectoral leadership structures, local collaborative partnerships and cross-sectoral, community-based structures in place. These can be used to ensure that monopolies are guarded against and variety is encouraged in order to meet local needs.

It is possible to see how a model of quality assurance or benchmarking of vocational learning could be drawn from the needs-meeting model and its various dimensions described in this case. Such a model would need to focus on the vocational learning experience, as suggested in this case study.

3

RIVERTOWN: A tale of two VETs

In smaller areas, you are not looking at big [training] classes, you are looking at small classes. And there [is] not the flexibility available from funding mechanisms to be able to accommodate one or two people. And transport... People sitting in the cities have no concept of what problems and issues there are out in rural areas, or the distances they have got to travel. So, he [training provider], coming from a city, had absolutely no idea of distances and problems in rural areas... They don't realise that, you know, you are isolated on a farm. You only go to town once a week. You haven't got the petrol to go to town more than once a week.

Adult literacy training provider

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SITE SNAPSHOT

This case study centres on four towns and their districts: Rivertown (population of the town 1781) which is located about 144km west of another major town, Timbertown; Rivertown A (population of 1238), Rivertown B (population of 519) and Rivertown C (population 686). The towns are located in a rural region about 220km from the state's capital city. Although the region is defined by National Economics (1998) as a 'lifestyle type', rural industry predominates. This industry is mainly mixed agriculture but other important sources of economic activity include forestry and fishing, retail trade and tourism.

There is a TAFE annexe in Rivertown and a high school in each of the three shires although Rivertown A does not have senior high school students (Years 11 and 12). These institutions continue to be the providers of formal VET in this site along with a small number of private providers from outside the study site. A small training provider has recently amalgamated with a larger one and can now offer ARF levels 2, 3, and 4 in the area. Informal and non-formal VET opportunities are provided by business, local government and environmental groups. Among all 10 study sites in this report, participation in TAFE is lowest in Rivertown. There is only one TAFE annexe in the district and it is likely that low education participation is related to access difficulties in terms of distance and transport options and costs. People frequently did not have access to appropriate transport or technology. Rivertown C for example, which has no public transport system, has only just acquired internet access. Over 70% of organisational representatives interviewed disagreed with the statement that 'vocational education and training services are adequate in this area'. This was higher than at all other sites. A large proportion believed retraining opportunities in the area were poor and this proportion was more than double any other site.

Very little change occurred in VET provision between 1999 and 2000. There has been, however, an increase in school-based traineeships linked to the hospitality industry and a retail training centre. The data also indicates a small increase in literacy and numeracy support available through Youth Access programs. Training providers and employers interviewed suggested that employers are taking more initiative in providing accredited training courses for their staff.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS:

B ***Configurations***

3 What are the different configurations of VET provision occurring and how do they relate to these changes?

5 How do the different configurations of VET provision meet the changing needs of stakeholders?

C ***Effectiveness***

6 How effective are the different configurations of VET provision in meeting the needs of the stakeholders?

ISSUES:

Distance, small size of community, learning for managing natural resources, collaboration (structures, procedures and relationships)

A tale of two VETs

In any town in the world, differing values form the core of localised reflections of larger-scale influences such as technology or government policy. People take sides over these different values, or 'issues'. Conflicts might occur over the closure of a TAFE campus, a building or development proposal, a bank closure or a disagreement between groups of people such as farmers and 'greenies' over differing values for their land and livelihood. Conflicts such as these underlie the mythology of the peaceful idyll of 'community', espoused in modern 'Sea Change' scenarios. Rivertown, like the case study about Billabong illustrates the importance of the history of the district. In Billabong it was found that the strength of a history could be used for positive or negative influence. One of the negative possibilities is that the entrenched history can (a) exclude other groups, or (b) act as a barrier to manage the forces of change in a responsible and proactive fashion. At the local level, vocational education and training must serve a number of roles, and its role as a tool for the development and sustainability of the local region is paramount.

Rivertown addresses Research Question 3 in particular. This question asks about the changes in regional Australia in terms of industry profiles, employment and related skill demands and levels of VET participation. The Rivertown case study also provides illustrative power to illuminate Research Questions 5 and 6, which are about how configurations of VET meet the changing needs of stakeholders and their effectiveness in meeting needs.

Rivertown is a site in which the changing economic base, in this case changing from a timber town to an economic base that includes tourism, divides the community. Such divisions are driven by a loyalty to historical identities and the tension created by a need to respond to external pressures to change and shift identity. All local histories have important implications for VET and its local configurations. Histories can, of course, be of many different kinds: geographical, event-based, individual or corporate. The tale of two VETs told in this case study treads on difficult territory. It attempts to bring two parallel stories of vocational education and training in a community together in such a way as to illustrate the power of values-vested histories in shaping present events toward future goals.

On the one hand, the vested values of both stories lie in the traditional Australian values associated with 'the bush'. The rural/urban divide, based on the 'us and them' rhetoric, underlies some of the perceptions. On the other hand, there are corporate values from outside the local community seemingly pitted against the perceived needs of 'the locals'. These two stories are brought together *not* to point the finger or be critical in any way of either party. It is, however, crucial for all stakeholders in the change process from governments to the communities themselves, to understand the forces and reasons at work at the local level. Managing local change processes is of primary importance for VET in the regions, as it is through knowledge and skills development that communities arm themselves with the tools to manage their own change processes positively.

1 VET from the inside out 1999

A Lakeside Committee was formed to try to beautify and reclaim the banks of the lake on which part of the town is located. The group affiliated with Landcare, a registered body, to be eligible for government funding. They subsequently received $45 000 over three years. While Landcare is largely rural based, the Committee draws in people from a wide range of organisations, including local orchardists, the Development Association and local Indigenous groups.

A project plan was drawn up and the plan is to get rid of the exotic trees that have grown up along the bank and to replace them with native trees. Part of the project involves collecting seeds to use in the revegetation program. There is a core group of five people in the project, but it is often possible to have up to 30 volunteers helping on planting days.

Generally, it is perceived that the town gets together to work on important projects. The group's major project is building a bush house at the High School to raise seedlings to be planted out. This resource can be used by the high school as well. The local convent school and the local high school will plant trees. Volunteer groups will also plant. A group of eight trainees under the management of Greencorp (a training company) has used the Lakeside project as their base for training. The project provides the materials and the trainees provide the labour. They have been working there for six months and are about to finish. They have been involved in all kinds of training on the site. They have cut down exotics, replanted the banks of the lake and put in walking tracks. Local businesses are asked directly if they will help and many have contributed to the project. There were also outside links involved with the project. For example, the Department of Natural Resources was involved with the grant application, and Greening Australia and Greencorp have also been involved in different aspects.

One section of the Lakeside which is a traditional Indigenous area has been allocated to the local Indigenous group to deal with in their own way. They intend to plant bush-tucker trees and to put in a dance area. The Indigenous dancing group will also be involved.

2 VET from the outside in 1999

Participation in TAFE is lowest in this region of all those across the 10 sites. The local campus of the TAFE is threatened with closure because the only courses it offers — standard construction and engineering courses — are not viable in this area.

At one stage, the community wanted the TAFE to run a computer course, but the TAFE didn't have the resources, so the course was run from a school at a regional centre an hour's drive away. The decision on which courses to run is apparently beyond the control of the local management, and in the hands of the manager at the main campus about an hour and a half's drive away in the regional centre.

The demise of the TAFE would result in the loss of about three jobs to the town, a physical asset of considerable value, and an enormous potential asset to the community and region. A local committee led by the Mayor is now seeking ways to secure the funds to ensure the TAFE stays in town and provides 'a more community responsive' community college offering.

1 VET from the inside out 2000	2 VET from the outside in 2000
The Lakeside Project is continued much as planned in 2000, in association with the local schools, regenerating with native flora, landscaping, recreational facilities and, more recently, the construction of a permanent bird feeder to attract bird life to the area. It is an ongoing development and maintenance project. The Lakeside Committee is also initiating a number of other projects. One is building a walking track from a nearby weir to a local park. This requires the building of a suspension bridge over a creek. Funding for this project is available from a previous National Heritage grant and construction expertise of local town engineers will be utilised. Another project the committee is involved in, together with the Rivertown ATSIC group, is the development of a 'Early Settlers' Place' just out of town. It appears that this combined committee is the body mainly involved in overseeing the development of this project. The Lakeside Committee is also collaborating with neighbouring towns/districts to attract a new Greencorp to the area. The districts plan to provide a variety of specific projects that Greencorp could work on, including the 'Early Settlers' Place' in Rivertown and a remnant forest in a neighbouring district The Lakeside Committee also collaborates with a local Inland Development Association, and with a recently formed regional youth outreach group, on the development of these projects.	Ownership of the local TAFE campus is a major issue. The problem is reported to be one of top-down bureaucratic control by the distant larger centre providing 'solutions' that are not sympathetic with local needs, and viewing the remote centre as a cost. Local management of the TAFE campus is restricted, so there is no local opportunity or vested authority to make the campus more relevant to local needs. A senior figure in local government says: *Jamie's the [TAFE] teacher: No — he's more than a teacher. Some of the things that have been identified…over the months is that we don't have any principal, I mean if we don't really have a boss here… They're supposed to be doing that from [the distant larger centre], but we…seldom see any of the directors up here. We don't actually have a boss, I mean Jamie actually keeps things running.* This unresolved situation has resulted in local action to gain control of the TAFE, involving collaboration with other local organisations (Primary Industry government department, agricultural research station, meat industry and others) for resources and for consulting community needs in order to develop a viable market for a 'new' and local TAFE. Funding for a needs-analysis study of the region has been authorised by DETYA, to be undertaken in February-March 2001. From this it is hoped that, in consultation with a reference group including community members, Rivertown TAFE, the umbrella TAFE institution for the region and DETYA, a clearer picture of the appropriate future direction for the annexe can be decided. Meanwhile an electronic learning centre has been established in the TAFE annexe, and the construction course has been taken over by the high school, although it is still run within the TAFE building. Lobbying of the local member of parliament for the retention of the TAFE by the community continues.

Discussion

The first tale, *VET from the inside out* tells a story of informal VET meeting locally identified needs around managing natural resources. To meet these needs a range of collaborative arrangements are undertaken, whether it is for the sharing of resources, as with the High School, establishing internal community linkages with local businesses or external linkages with government departments and other non-government organisations. The inclusive nature of the activities undertaken by the Lakeside Committee and its attendance to specific requirements is illustrated by the planting of bush-tucker trees and the creation of a dance area. The Lakeside Committee appears to have provided a leadership model that is inclusive and involves a range of horizontal and vertical linkages internal and external to the community.

The second tale, *VET from the outside in* tells a very different story of exclusion and seeming indifference. Distance and funding issues add to the complexity of this story. Inconsistent funding is perceived by many as the major inhibitor of quality vocational learning in the Rivertown area. Its effect is primarily twofold: the under-utilisation of the TAFE annexe in Rivertown and accessibility to training in terms of the extra cost of travel for teachers and students. Rivertown TAFE is an annexe of Timbertown TAFE, which itself is part of a wider umbrella Institute of TAFE and the monies for Rivertown are part of the Timbertown budget. There is a perception by some respondents that Rivertown is often 'forgotten' when it comes to allocating money. Health care workers and community organisation representatives felt that there were few accredited or substantial courses at Rivertown but rather a concentration of crafts and literacy. Thus a six-hour round trip to Timbertown or a four-hour round trip to an alternative major town was necessary to access many courses. In addition people from Rivertown A accessing Rivertown TAFE had a two-hour round trip often getting home at 11 o'clock at night. A public training provider explained that the majority of Year 12 high school students have to go away to either complete their high school training or do further training. An increase in flexible delivery via a new electronic learning centre at the TAFE annexe has the potential to go some way to improving the range of courses available locally, but this had not occurred by mid 2000.

In Rivertown it appears the private sector (individual employers and providers) has considerably more linkages than the public sector. The TAFE annexe had no collaborative or partnership arrangements with other providers and only one linkage with other organisations to plan and deliver training. Of the groups of organisations working together to plan and deliver training, only half worked with training providers. Other providers, mainly community service organisations, provided informal and non-formal training for members and the community, for example in first aid.

Respondents frequently expressed concern over the lack of local availability of courses. Limited population, remoteness of the site and attracting quality tutors make it difficult to provide and economically sustain many courses. The loss of a tutor for a construction course meant the loss of that particular course. It was widely perceived that quality learning in terms of apprenticeships and traineeships in the Rivertown site was inhibited by two main factors: lack of community awareness of the benefits for employers (e.g. subsidies) and a high demand for work placements within a thin employer market.

Conclusion

Of all the sites, this one shows most graphically the central importance of the role of 'the local' in planning and developing VET in the regions. By 'the local' we include local planning, local leadership and local involvement. In the *VET from the outside in* story, a story of the formal VET system, systemic cultural blinkers meant that the community's culture of collaborative mostly nonformal (or non-accredited) VET was invisible until local action forced a new look. A crucial factor in the local planning and development role is, however, to overcome the barrier of a sole reliance on bonding ties. Bonding ties are those networks relying on internal-to-the-community bonds only. These must, the case shows, be balanced by ties that provide the informational and resourcing links to the outside. These bridging ties can be traced in the *VET from the inside out* story as originating with the one group, the Lakeside Committee. This group used the strength of localised bonding ties to provide the internal resources to begin building outwards. It can be seen that the bridging tentacles spread across many, many other groups and organisations, involving the business community, industry, volunteer groups, many different training responses, Indigenous groups and others.

The strength of the *VET from the inside out* story is also manifest in the use of the collective *histories*, as a resource for collective *present* planning, for *future* collective goals. Collective activity is difficult and messy, but it deals with the different values in a constructive and collaborative fashion.

The case study illustrates the difficulties faced by a small, remote community in negotiating for formal VET to meet its needs. The community has the basis for becoming an effective learning community with its strong collaborative working arrangements. However, it appears to lack sufficient effective external – or bridging - networks for accessing VET. The Reference Group, referred to in Tale 2, 2000, is perhaps the beginning of building such ties. However, the power for decision making is external to the community and to the group. The changing economic base of Rivertown and the perception that values held by industry traditional to the area, such as timber and values held by the evolving tourist industry in the area are in conflict, reflect a struggle with changing identity. At the same time this struggle highlights needs for local knowledge, skills and leadership. As the industry-base of a region changes and diversifies so it impacts on the identity of local communities. Collective or collaborative activity requires at least agreed purposes or tasks. Local community groups, as in the example of the Lakeside Committee, appear to have successfully addressed and continue to address this issue. Much of the work they undertake involves local decision-making. Harder to resolve is the development of collective or collaborative activity where the power structures for decision making are external to the community.

Formal and informal VET have the potential to play a role in assisting such communities to develop the knowledge, skills and networks to address such issues. The situation is in part, analogous to the Industry as Heritage Project in Billabong, where external funds were important in providing resources to encourage local competitors to work collaboratively.

4

EMU SPRINGS: VET through the eyes of a provider

It's a community owned [training and employment group], community driven... We have a management committee and we meet generally on the fourth Wednesday of every month. It's entirely voluntary so it's run by people who care and one of the things that impressed me with VETwork is its ability to respond quickly to an identified need....OK, the people who attend who are on our Committee are interested in this regional centre, they don't get paid, there is no sitting fees or anything like that, so they actually care. Very supportive. I guess we look and see and listen and hear. And of course I suppose there is a collective of people in the region who are always looking out for opportunity and anything that is going to make a difference — that is going to attract new industry, new business, create new opportunities. It's an open-door policy.

Coordinator of a community-based Job network training provider

SITE SNAPSHOT

The Emu Springs site has a coastal location and includes Emu Springs (population 4035), Emu Springs A (737) Emu Springs B (325) and Emu Springs C (1035). Emu Springs, located approximately three hours' drive south from its state's capital city, is defined by National Economics (1998) as 'rural' because agriculture forms the primary basis of employment. Primary industries such as broadacre cropping, wool, livestock, horticulture and fishing are the major activities. The ten year intercensal data trend suggests that most industries are in decline. The exceptions are manufacturing, property and business services as well as education. However, one main industry is responsible for much of the manufacturing employment. It closed in 1999 and partially re-opened on an occasional basis, in 2000. Its future is uncertain.

The site includes Indigenous communities and a Muslim community. Unemployment at the 1996 Census for the Emu Springs region was the lowest among all the study sites in this report. Given a decline in industries, the reason for the low rate of unemployment appears to be related to a loss of youth in the region. Similar to other rural-based regions, Emu Springs has almost zero employment growth.

Emu Springs's skill levels were relatively low compared to the other study sites (higher only than those for Rivertown), yet overall growth in qualification levels was above the national average with postgraduate diploma qualifications recording the strongest growth. Participation in TAFE at Emu Springs in 1996 was above average when compared to similar rural sites. Participation at universities was relatively low and this is probably related to difficulties of access. While the main campus of the College of TAFE is some distance away, there is a regional campus at Emu Springs and annexes at Emu Springs C, Emu Springs B and Emu Springs A. There is a telecentre offering VET, a major community-based provider, the CDEP, and VET in schools. There is a range of VET options within the local Indigenous communities related to building construction and the establishment of Indigenous small businesses, many of which are supported by the local Lands Councils and the Aboriginal Development Commission.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS:

B ***Configurations***

5 How do the different configurations of VET provision meet the changing needs of stakeholders?

C ***Effectiveness***

6 How effective are the different configurations of VET provision in meeting the needs of the stakeholders?

ISSUES:

Collaboration, relationships, literacy and numeracy

Diverse VET for a diverse community

The quote at the start of this case study hints at the processes that service the diverse range of training activities going on in Emu Springs and its local district. There is a high Indigenous population, a significant Muslim migrant group, a shifting industry base with agriculture and a major industry in transition – a fascinating mix in one region. Indigenous communities are integrated in the VET networks through well-developed networks with the local TAFE College, the CDEP scheme and the Work for the Dole program. The interviews in 2000 included many mentions of groups of organisations working with training providers to deliver and plan training. Private providers had more links than public providers with other organisations. State government offices had more extensive links than local government, and State government appeared to be best placed to facilitate collaboration because of its range and number of linkages.

Local constraints to VET were perceived to centre around funding bodies 'not being in touch with local needs'. This is reflected in government policy which many local providers reported to disadvantage Indigenous and NESB groups through the reduction of literacy and numeracy courses in favour of VET-jobs related courses. It is also evident at times when the government supports national training providers over local ones.

There have been few changes to VET statistics in the Emu Springs site, and most of the changes were to do with participation in VET that was not counted by the statistics. Funding is perceived as the major factor driving those changes that have occurred. Economic reasons have necessitated the amalgamation of some VET groups since 1999 and there has been an increase in flexible delivery.

A significant and recurring theme was around the issue of the reduction in literacy and numeracy courses in this area with a significant Indigenous and NESB population. Courses which are nominally job related are favoured, which is again reported, somewhat ironically, to reduce the chances of these groups to gain entry level skills to the very VET courses that would lead to employment, thus compounding their employment difficulties. The lack of availability of jobs meant that much of this 'job-related' training held little relevance for the participants.

TAFE continues to be a major provider of VET, ACE and access to university courses through a regional campus at Emu Springs, as well as having agents in the smaller communities. While participation in TAFE at Emu Springs in 1996 was above average when compared to similar rural sites, Emu Springs' skill levels were relatively low among the study sites (higher only than those for Rivertown – a point raised in the case study for that site). It is possible that lack of job opportunities following training discourages participation. An interviewee employed by TAFE explained that there was limited employment in the area regardless of skills acquired. This is exacerbated by local business and services experiencing difficulty in recruiting and retaining experienced, skilled staff, and the difficulties of keeping them skilled and up-to-date. Barriers ranged from the lack of suitable accommodation and remuneration packages, to difficulties in access to continuing education. A number of such organisations recruited from other major towns. Limited work experience opportunities feeds this cycle of recruiting already skilled staff from 'out of town'. One business-person highlights the need for trainees and apprentices to be exposed to a range of experiences:

> The range of work experience … [they] haven't really gone around other shops to sort of pick up different things and knowledge

A healthy, diverse industry base appears essential in providing a range of learning opportunities.

A planned new community centre for Indigenous groups will provide new informal learning opportunities to supplement the well-developed links between TAFE and the Indigenous communities in the site. These plans are also tightly linked with the development of close collaborative arrangements amongst Indigenous groups, internal and external to the community. These arrangements are a means of addressing the need to link training with work opportunities and hands on experience. However, as the following Indigenous leader notes, there are difficulties to overcome, including that of leadership:

> Aboriginal organisations have been trying to generate their own economic base rather than, developing their own employment and also industry. But it has been very difficult over the years because they haven't had the right people to actually get in there and be the entrepreneurs to encourage employment or to encourage enterprise in these areas and it takes a bit of money which a lot of the Aboriginal people just haven't got … But, again, people still need to be trained and it is very difficult because there has been very few Aboriginal people who have got the expertise to train people. And Aboriginal people of this day, you know, and in the political climate, feel, they feel reluctant, I think, a lot of times to be trained by regulars or white people. Because they think "Well there goes the Aboriginal money back into the white pockets again". Because most of the time when Aboriginal programmes are developed, they come from ATSIC's budget and then that budget goes to training programmes and the training programmes will then go into "Okay, let's get a lecturer in" and the lecturer might be, 10 times out of 10, it is a white person. So then what happens is the money is then directed into white society rather than back into the Aboriginal community. So that sort of has, that is not then putting money, giving the Aboriginal community an economic base.

This reflects similar concerns for Indigenous populations in other sites.

VET providers and collaboration

While there were respondents who spoke positively of the 'good things happening' in Emu Springs (such as the new library, art gallery, nursing home and so on), other respondents spoke of the palpable sense of depression in this town. Many also spoke of changes experienced by the farming community, where small farms are being brought out, the negative impact of world prices on wool in predominantly sheep country is felt strongly, and rising levels of salinity all add to pressures on the farming community. Despite, or because of these factors, there is active collaboration in delivering VET to meet local needs.

Strong collaborative arrangements were evident within the professional health community in Emu Springs, to address a range of educational needs in relation to health. These ranged from educating a range of stakeholders about depression, to oral hygiene. Health providers identified a range of health problems, many of which they attributed to depression. A health professional describes the impact of rural decline on the community below:

> …we've had a number of suicides in this area in the last, particularly over the last two years actually and what's happened is, you know, because we're an agricultural area, for example with the wool industry has been in decline for seven years and so not only are the farmers getting really down but there's a spin-off in the community as well.

To address this need, this health professional linked with organisations working locally and those resourced externally, such as the Health Department to form a 'team' – a collaborative arrangement.

> I was working with [name] and another financial counselor from [name of service organisation] and two members of the Health Department and a person from AWA and we combined and formed a team and we have been giving presentations about stress and depression to a lot of the businesses in this region because we found that people like bank staff, the agents, like you know the Elders guys and West Farmers etc., banks, accountants, people like that who are dealing with farmers who are also really down, these people are actually getting the spin-off of dealing with depressed people all the time and then not knowing what to do and it's kind of getting them down too.

The work of the team crosses the boundaries of many communities and stakeholders within Emu Springs, from schools, to farmers to local businesses in the town. This is another example of locally identified need being met by developing collaborative arrangements.

Given the preceding overview of Emu Springs's VET and collaborative arrangements, this case study now focuses on one VET provider. This exemplar provides detail about VET regional dynamics through the eyes of a successful VET provider who uses a multitude of collaborative arrangements. The manager of this community training and employment group, demonstrated an enormous depth and breadth of comprehension of the district, the training and employment needs, and the processes required to 'get things happening' and, indeed, to keep things going.

In this case study, a single interview has been edited to sharpen the focus on the VET provider's story of VET in Emu Springs, which follows. Notes in the margin highlight issues for effective VET outcomes in this community.

The case illustrates the answers to Research Questions 5 and 6 which are about meeting different and changing needs through configurations of VET, and how effective these configurations are in meeting VET stakeholder needs.

Story of multifaceted VET through the eyes of a provider

Issues	Interview
	About me and my job
Common purpose	I've been actually working with VETwork for seven years. As far as our core business goes, our main aim is to assist people to access stable employment, further education and/or training options. Which is a very broad brief! I mean anything under that umbrella goes.
Financial and physical resources	VETwork housed TAFE, we bought TAFE into Emu Springs and housed TAFE for the first three years, till it had sufficient autonomy to move without us, and stand on its own two feet. We financed the Telly Centre, $10 000 cash and gave it two years' free rental. When you talk to the Coordinator, you'll find that's actually our training.
Physical location to provide VET and related needs	VETwork is, I'd like to say, all things to all people, but we house the Centrelink agency. So as such people can lodge their forms, get assistance to fill out forms, come and say my cheque hasn't arrived, whatever, we are the first face over the counter. We're the glorified post office essentially at the moment, we're not privy to information, we are not part of any decision making or any assessment procedures. But what it does do, is that we provide a very necessary community function — very, very busy, we maintain time and motion studies and stats on all our different areas of activities, because we engage in so many diverse areas, and that way we can sort of keep track of it. Because we aim to be, well not cost effective, but bottom line cost neutral. I get deeply concerned if we start going backwards and Centrelink has that capability as a community agency.
Literacy and numeracy Meeting local needs Local planning continuity	It's a community development role. Absolutely. And we always have done this, and we set up the Adult Literacy and Numeracy Program in town. The University Annex up at the Computer College was set up by one of our previous coordinators. I've been in the role of Manager for a year. Preceding years I was the Youth Information Officer, prior to that I've been living in Emu Springs for four years. It's really interesting. People access agencies like VETwork because they want assistance. They don't want assistance next week. And what we're talking about essentially boils down to the dollar. And we are talking about socially and financially disadvantaged people, so they really need it now. And the sort of people that work in agencies like VETwork, they mightn't have letters, university degrees after their names, they're just the right people for the job, and it is nigh on impossible to ignore someone in need. So even if they are in the middle of a writing a submission and there's a deadline and they have to get it off and someone walks through the door, you stop and you can't help yourself. So I'll fix that by actually shifting it down a room, and I will dedicate one staff member to it.

About my community

Size of community

I find Emu Springs is a bit of an enigma, it's small enough to be cohesive, but large enough to be divisive. And a lot of different cultures! — sometimes it will sort of spill over — but also fairly secular. Very good people, I think. It's interesting to see, workwise. Its population remains static and that's very interesting. And the fact that the population remain static is an indication that it doesn't grow. And shops open, shops shut, shops open, shops shut and it's one of those things. I said right at the beginning, one of those populations where we are large enough to think well the opportunity is there let's do it, but it's not sustainable. We have restaurants that open up and then after two years they shut down, so on and so forth.

Young people

Local evaluation meeting individual needs

One looks around and sees areas of growth in the community but we lose people all the time. We have an exodus of young people leaving because there aren't the opportunities, whether that's employment, further education and/or training, it doesn't matter. We know this for a fact because one of the activities VETwork undertakes is School Leaver Program on behalf of the State's Department of Training and the Education Department. We survey the upper school students to establish their career path aims — you know what they wish to do — and we actually follow them up and ascertain what they are up to and how they are going. By way of an early intervention strategy, we then look to working with those unplaced students whether it's to achieve a vocation or whatever, and work one on one with them. It is fairly similar to a Federal initiative.

Distance

Local planning and ownership

I actually think that we are seeing an acknowledgment of the fact that we are losing our young people. There are things for example like getting a dedicated TAFE college, and that will make a big difference. Just one aspect of that is the wool industry — this district has over a million sheep. This is a very viable ongoing employment activity say, for a shearer whose back is giving out or whatever. At the moment if any of our local people wish to get a wool-classing certificate, they have to travel 130 kms to access the course so while. a self-paced wool classing course is great 'cause I mean if it's a rainy day you can just go round and do it. Of course if it's a rainy day in Emu Springs you have to jump in your car and drive an hour and three-quarters then do your day at the College and then drive back again. So when we get our own TAFE College up and running, those sort of vocational training areas will just make a world of difference I think

How we go about achieving our goals

Meeting community needs

Networks

Responding to local needs and networks

VETwork is community owned, community driven, we have a management committee and we meet generally on the fourth Wednesday of every month. It's entirely voluntary so it's run by people who care and one of the things that impressed me with VETwork is its ability to respond quickly to an identified need. The people who attend who are on our Committee are interested in this regional centre. They don't get paid, there is no sitting fees or anything like, so they actually care. Very supportive. I guess we look and see and listen and hear and of course I suppose there is a collective of people in the region who are always looking out for opportunity and anything that is going to make a difference, that is going to attract new industry, new business, create new opportunities, it's an open-door policy. VETwork most certainly and anyone can come and sit on our Committees. Can actively participate. I don't know I guess it's the people who are in the network who look to identify an opportunity.

Need for resourcing Continuity	Historically we very much thought on our toes, and you know we have calls from farmers over a month and they say, 'Well I need someone to drive trucks'. And we'd set up a B Class truck driver's course or that sort of stuff. Currently we're doing Work for the Dole, which does a lot of good, but I wish it was more viable — not from a profit perspective but from a resource perspective. It's very hard to make a significant difference to the participants when the Government is quibbling over dollars. But Work for the Dole is good in so far as it's a long-term program and when you are looking at vocational needs for the unemployed individuals I have a very strong belief that long-term initiatives have long-term results. Short-term projects, two-week programs and stuff like that, that is just not going to work — you know a week and they're gone.
Relating to clients/recognising specific needs	And when you are dealing with youth you have to quite often look at creating a work ethic where there might not have been one there before. You have to teach them all the life skills, getting out of bed, you know, stuff that we take for granted. And you have to actually teach, and also when you are dealing with long-term unemployed, one of the biggest factors that people tend to ignore is that they don't have the stamina that we do. Well you think okay we go to work and we work a 40-hour week or whatever one does. But long-term unemployed people they can't do that. They might be able to do it for a week, two weeks, but then they get tired. They get sick. Unemployed people historically access medical services at a rate, like close to twice what employed people do.
	Some collaborative activities
Collaboration Integration of local needs Networks Leadership	Since I've been sitting in this chair I've been looking to work collaboratively with all the other agencies in town. It's actually surprisingly difficult because everybody seems to be so busy, you'd think that a town this size that you'd get together. In the last months we've had one service provider get together, not just training, we're talking about family and children's services and home help, all the service providers so we can just, it's a network. Whilst we all know each other and get on fine on an as needs basis, I think we could work more cooperatively and achieve more. I'm very keen to do that, in fact it's one of the things that I wrote up in our new business plan, that we'll be looking to contact all of the key stakeholders and form some sort of, just a steering group, you know, an ideas situation. So we throw some ideas around and hopefully by utilising that network we can get some more initiatives off the ground.
Sharing resources, local planning	We share the training with the TAFE. One of my staff members is currently doing Occupational Health and Safety and First Aid units to TAFE courses at the moment, and we also cater to a different type of group. Our relationship with the [other] Centrelink is great; fabulous. They're incredibly open and helpful for us. Very supportive. We are in the process of restructuring our Centrelink and shifting it down to one of our other buildings on the railway platform because it's preventing us from looking to address the needs — the training needs — and the job creation needs — of the community because it is so hungry: hungry of staff time.
Meeting individual and community needs	I've actually set up with our local CEP Coordinator and cleared it with Centrelink that we will now create two CEDP placements in our Centrelink office, so that will provide a training platform for two Aboriginal people per year and we'll just cycle them through that. Because there's no two ways of looking at that, you go on the front desk on Centrelink — people skills, admin skills — every which way you look at it it's a fast learning curve. So we'll then get back to our core business which is as a community body training provider.

	as a community body training provider.
Collaboration to increase range of courses Networks Local planning to utilise local resources to meet needs	VETwork is actually looking at working with the local high school in relation to one of the, well, the hospitality area of the VET hospitality area. It's called Hospitality, Metals and Business is the three VET subject areas at the moment at the high school. Cause it's so different to Metro areas I mean they have, you know, different VET areas that the kids can access, while we just don't have the resources. I'd like to set up a bush-tucker restaurant here. It's just the right part of the business innovation set-up and we're working with the town, BEC, Business Enterprise Centres. I think a bush-tucker initiative would be 100% culturally owned, and I see that as being very important in relation to our local indigenous community as instilling that sort of sense of pride, self worth in one's own self and culture and I think very necessary. Huge employment opportunities, significant training opportunities, a number of traineeships, apprenticeships could be generated by initiatives such as that.
Proactive networking VET coordination	We actively foster relationships with industry, and my 2IC also spends a lot of time out on the road talking and identifying training and employment opportunities. We have a package deal approach when she's doing outreach and talking to employers. It's not only in relation to whether your needs are being met, it's also in training for personal development, whether it be conflict resolution, anything that is going to assist the process. We also negotiate for work experience placements and we work in with the high school in relation to that with the, I hate the term, the remedial level students. And we look at vocational placement for them and work with the employers. So rather than the school sort of approach, which they do, it's more of a collaborative concerted front and that seems to work very well. I think, if we just ignored everybody for months we'd probably lose an awful lot of credibility.
	Networking
Internal and external networks	I have really effective networks. My staff also network among themselves and we have a very open-centre situation. One is a Shire Councillor as well as being a VETworker, and she also sits as Secretary for the Regional Community Youth Action Committee, local youth drug action. So I get all the minutes from all these various things as well. I work with the Aboriginal Affairs Department and see them as well. And the Emu Springs Aboriginal Corporation — I sort of try and keep aware of anything and everything that is happening in the region, certainly anything that is of import to my client group. On top of that, as a State Department of Training funded program, I liaise very closely with the person who is our Regional Employment Development Officer. We all get assigned REDOs — Regional Employment Development Officers — who provide us with a conduit into the Department of Training and also keep us fully informed and abreast of any initiative. And it's a two-way street. Our REDO officer sits on our committees and is a very valuable person. I selectively target.
	The ins and outs of the community's needs
	We're a farming community essentially and we have a big industry on top of the hill. No-one knows what's happening with it. It is very frustrating and demoralising for the workers, I mean they worked one day this week. Who knows, it's a lot of pressure on people's lives. And I think I'm sure that is probably reflected in the domestic violence statistics. The sooner it is fully resolved the better. There are all sorts of union issues and all sorts of stuff coming into play there. Well, wheat and sheep are very seasonal. I personally believe we are seeing less seasonal

	jobs, and I think that's come about in some part due to the Federal Government's policy in relation to Youth Allowance. I think there is actually, some wouldn't say it, but we are seeing higher hidden unemployment. Kids staying on the farms, kids getting looked after in their communities 'cause they are not eligible for Youth Allowance or AUSTUDY, because of their total means and assets.
Distance	Kids in rural remote areas, if they are looking to access further education, inevitably we are talking about parents thinking, 'Well, okay, I've got to somehow support my child, you know ship them 250kms to go out to the state's capital city, or 130kms to go down to an alternative main town, to get a roof over their heads: you know — bang, bang, bang — food and it just doesn't stop. It's beyond their means.
Proactive identification of local needs Different cultural understandings	Interesting — we actually just did the local follow-up of last year's school leavers and locally we only have nine, well who we're working with one-on-one. There are more, well that was out of a total of 60 probably or 70. But that's what I mean by hidden unemployment, because some of those kids you know will be on the family farm because there's no other option. The nine are the ones we've actually identified, and we're actually working with. The Malay community are very good at covering up. I don't know whether it's a pride thing, cultural thing and it doesn't matter. The thing is that some of their young people aren't claiming benefit. One of the ways of identifying your target group is of course when they access social service, such as the welfare system, because you can then actually identify them and sort of take steps to assist them. But the Malay community, someone will pop up and you'll say, 'Oh where have you been', and they'll say, 'Oh no I've been here two and a half years', you know two and a half years and they haven't accessed the system, and the community looks after them and sort of closes ranks. And whilst I sort of understand perhaps the pride issues and all those sorts of things, long-term I think they are doing the individual a disservice.
	The youth who leave town — you know, they are up in the city with all the social implications that go hand in hand with that — and perhaps the career path opportunities as well.
	Some personal thoughts on the training system
Financial resources Role of government Limitations of National Scheme	In terms of training we do out of this office, anyone who walks through our door, we find out who they are, what their circumstance is. Before CES was privatised we would take anybody and everybody, because VETwork received its core funding from the State Department of Training, the Jobnet program, the State Employment Assistant Strategy. We now have to differentiate between Joblink clients and Job Network clients. So if you are a Job Network client basically the Federal Government should be looking after you by way of the Job Network service providers.
Brokerage Local whole community	So we identify whether the individual is Job Network or Joblink. If the individual is Job Network because the Job Network doesn't, in my personal opinion, deal appropriately with the needs of the unemployed people in our specific region or area, we do try to assist Job Network individuals on a fee-service basis. So we will ring that individual's service provider, can we help, wants to do a first aid course, wants some job search training skilling whatever. We kind of act like a broker. But they don't like spending any money. We will provide them with one-on-one assistance for as long as they need it, whether that's putting a resumé together, job applications, talking to employers, setting up work experience placements, running them through personal development programs, including deportment,

and whole person perspective	whatever it takes.
Identifying and meeting local needs	With Work for the Dole, we've set it up so that we have five different areas that they can go through, cause some people have different strengths, different needs. We put it into our costing so we can deck them out: the boys with the tie and shirt, teach them about shaving, personal hygiene, polishing shoes. That is a foreign concept for a lot of people, you know. I mean I went along and I delivered training. I was going to deliver a customer service workshop for the Work for the Dolers last week, and all my handouts, notes just sat there for two hours and we just ran an open session on work ethics and belief system, motivation. The only reason that came about was because they identified it, and you know as a facilitator, I just ran with it and you know they did all the work. But of course they wouldn't identify it unless they needed it, so it was just responding to a need.
Limitations of National Scheme and its negative impact	The big difference between, I guess we we're talking where VETwork comes from, we look to empowering the individual and, if one does that, the individual then goes out and, not only secures employment but effectively deals with the rest of their lives, I mean that's the ideal outcome. Job network disempowers the individual. You know, 'I don't care if you don't want to do that job, if you are capable of doing it you are *going* to do it otherwise we will put a breach recommendation to Centrelink and you'll lose some of your benefit, and if you continue to kick up we'll put another breach recommendation in and you'll lose more of your benefit'. The Federal Government has no heart in relation to their dealings with people. The first round of Job Network left huge rort opportunities, and I guess there was a pruning up exercise, it will be most interesting to see what the next lot of documentation looks like.
Continuity	What we would do with that money, is we would sit down as I said before, empowering the individual, we'll sit down discuss that individual's situation, okay where do you want to be, want do you want to do to make your life etc. etc. what is preventing you, barriers etc. and let's look at resolving those. It could be anything from paying off court fines so that the person can get their licence back so they can actually drive out to get work: you know in a rural area that's pretty important. It could be they need $80-worth of workboots or $300-worth of forklift training or whatever. It doesn't matter and we would look to utilising those monies to achieve that individual's main aim, and we would look at obviously cost recovery in the areas of admin but it would be all open table policy, that's all part of the empowerment process. Job Network, I have yet to come across a Job Network service provider who discusses openly with an unemployed individual, how much money has been allocated to them, how that individual would like that money to be spent. I've yet to come across one.

Discussion

In the case of Emu Springs, VET provision provides a number of salient points. The most obvious of these is that a funded position and organisation to coordinate and support the development of networks and collaboration in providing a variety of VET provision, has been very effective. The organisation is not in competition with its potential collaborators, so the collaborators have little to fear and often much to gain. Other important points arising from this perspective include:

- Because this provider has such extensive networks and collaborative arrangements, they are able to identify local need. They are also well placed to meet many of these needs, or put in place activities that will lead to the meeting of these needs;
- This provider displays leadership in actively seeking and promoting networks and collaboration;
- As a local provider, they understand local needs and the context their clients live within and recognise the very specific needs of individual clients;
- Decision making is local and therefore this provider has the power to identify and meet local needs;
- Continuity of resourcing is seen to be imperative in effective provision of VET
- The cost of sending children to urban areas for furthering their education is one many in rural areas struggle to afford or can no longer afford. VET provision assists to retain youth in the area;
- Federal government schemes, with their perceived lack of knowledge of local needs, can lead to a negative impact on clients and service delivery.

Conclusion

This case has highlighted the inner operations of the dynamics of a successful VET provider. The dynamics relate to sound principles of collaborative planning, purposeful, proactive networking, the development of bridging ties as well as bonding ties, two-way communication marked by reciprocity and respect, and a healthy understanding of what is important for the client groups. However, the Government's role as a facilitating partner in this process is undermined by a perception of a top-down approach to policy-driven strategy that ignore the human and social capital embedded in regional infrastructure systems. We therefore finish with a timely reminder about effective Government-community partnerships. It is taken from a provider's personal commentary on the current Job Network service, funded under the Commonwealth Government's unemployment policy:

> This is the Federal Government's initiative to resolve a social issue of unemployment by marrying it up to private enterprise. Marvellous, the two are mutually exclusive, you know, because private enterprise wants to spend the least amount of money and realise the maximum amount of profit and so that goes absolutely no way whatsoever to resolving the huge social issues around unemployment.

5

LAWSON: The challenge of Indigenous VET

A good [training] scheme is where you have got total community involvement...If you have got happy participants doing things they like and involved in the decision making then it will work. I think that is a basic fundamental.

Indigenous remote community leader

SITE SNAPSHOT

The Lawson site includes the town of Lawson (population 7979), Lawson A (631), and several remote Indigenous communities, including Lawson B (258) and Lawson C (211), 450km to the south. Lawson is defined by National Economics (1998) as a 'rural' type. However, the major industry of employment is government and defence and it differs from other 'rural' sites in terms of its considerable remoteness. The community is delineated in terms of income and employment along Indigenous/non-Indigenous lines. Mining, health and community services, in addition to manufacturing and tourism, all contributed to the growth of employment across industries at the time of the 1996 census. Unemployment was below the national average (7.5% compared with national average of 9.0% in 1996). Rates of unemployment among the Indigenous population are much higher than the community as a whole. While median income is high compared to other sites, dependence on social security is also high. Skill levels in Lawson at 1996 were relatively high compared to other sites, and growth of skills for the intercensal period was also above the national average. Increases in qualifications are consistent with changes in the occupational profile of the region, with strong increases in intermediate, clerical and sales, associate professionals and managers and administrators. There is a preponderance of young people in remote Indigenous communities.

Participation in TAFE at Lawson at 1996 was below the national average, and attendance at universities, while above most other sites, was also below the national average. However, development of government infrastructure and services has led to significant increases in participation. There is an extremely high early school dropout rate of Indigenous young people, with ongoing deleterious implications for skill levels of those subsequently entering VET programs. TAFE is available in Lawson through several institutions. There is one group training company, operated by a local Indigenous organisation, and a CDEP program. Lawson High School has developed a Student Access program, originally for Indigenous clients but now mainstreamed. There is on-the-job training in the cattle, retail and hospitality industries. The region does not have an official ACE sector, and there appear to be minimal opportunities for literacy and numeracy training.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS:

B	***Configurations***
3	What are the different configurations of VET provision occurring and how do they relate to these changes?
4	How and why did the different configurations of VET provision emerge?

ISSUES:

Diversity, collaboration, literacy and numeracy

A divided, remote and dispersed community

In discussing VET provision in the Lawson site, it is important to stress that provision varies between the town of Lawson and the remote communities that form part of the site. As well, the report on the first year of the study noted the parallel and largely separate Indigenous and non-Indigenous learning and community networks in all locations across the site. The interviews conducted in 2000 found that provision and participation remains sharply divided on Indigenous/non-Indigenous lines.

The Lawson site, as the subtitle of this case study suggests, provides a good demonstration of the impacts of collaboration and its absence. Collaboration produces benefits at community level as well as producing outcomes that meet targets related to national VET consistency strategies. The case addresses particularly Research Questions 3 and 4, which concern the different configurations involved in VET provision, and how and why the different configurations of VET provision have emerged.

The Indigenous experience of VET

The principles of effective and successful Indigenous VET delivery in rural and isolated Indigenous communities and the issues which affect them are well known (see Djama and VET 1998, pp. 36–38, pp. 97–103). According to the principles, VET must: be culturally appropriate; involve partnerships between providers and Indigenous communities and enterprises; include workplace learning as a key component of learning; be customised to specific Indigenous needs, including literacy and language; and be backed-up by extensive support on and off-site. In this section, these five principles are considered in relation to the experience in the Lawson site.

VET must be culturally appropriate

A sensitivity and awareness of socio-cultural issues and difference is imperative for quality learning. Many of the largely white learning, community and work organisations and services in Lawson position themselves in a wide range of ways (recruiting, nature of courses, staff, ambience, style of presentation, cultural appropriateness) which directly or indirectly, deliberately or otherwise, effectively limit access to Indigenous people. In an attempt to persist traditionally and resist politically, Indigenous organisations have positioned themselves, with government support, to do the same. Their own separate Indigenous organisations, including VET organisations, are funded by governments in a manner which perpetuates a division and separateness essential for effective Indigenous learning to occur. One particular college is the favoured provider for many Indigenous people. This campus provides two-way learning, whereby students have knowledge of the Western and Indigenous ways of thinking and acting.

There were widespread negative perceptions of Indigenous school education. It was felt that the curriculum in schools was ‘culturally inappropriate’ for Indigenous people and that the cutting of the bilingual program would result in a drop in participation and access. A statement was made that courses in Lawson were geared for trainees, and there was no access or availability for other people.

There were some moves between the 1999 and 2000 interviews to address the lack of culturally appropriate secondary education and VET opportunities, and perception of failure to meet the specific and different needs of adult and community learning in remote Indigenous communities.

Most VET delivery, apart from apprenticeships, traineeships and the little amount of VET in CDEP, was face to face. Flexible delivery modes as they are currently configured outside of Lawson, are often ineffective and expensive. A wide range of Indigenous research confirms that Indigenous VET requires cultural sensitivity, community collaboration, sustained personal contact, government commitment and continuity. These attributes are not embodied in or consistent with many forms of flexible delivery, including online delivery.

VET must involve partnerships between providers and Indigenous communities and enterprises

A key element of success is the delivery of courses on the Indigenous community sites. There is a considerable cost involved in this type of delivery. Problems of homesickness and drug/alcohol abuse, inhibitors for quality learning, are greatly reduced if trainees/students do not have to leave their community.

Positive changes since 1999 included more programs which are designed for Indigenous people and are Indigenous community based, with Indigenous trainers and joint community-provider accountability for outcomes, although there is plenty of scope for further moves in this direction. Changes in delivery methods, that is increased flexibility and more Indigenous-community-centred approaches, were prompted by a desire to improve quality of content and delivery and to improve accountability both horizontally and vertically within programs. Competitive tendering can inhibit effective partnerships:

> If you have got a presence in the community, you know the community, you know the people, those sorts of things, and if you are getting other people, outsiders to come in, it takes you a while [to find out] what the community's expectations are, what the community's feelings are, the undercurrents, those sorts of things. I think it is a disadvantage if the competitive tender goes to someone who hasn't got a presence. (Public provider)

To cater for the people in the Indigenous communities, their preferred college delivers both an on and off-campus programs. It was indicated that if training were to take place outside the community, for example in the region's capital city, then there would be no participants. Communities are concerned that if young people were to travel to the capital city they would not wish to return. Students are also brought into the preferred college campus for block release. However, new government restrictions on travel allowance are impacting on the delivery of tertiary programs such as these.

VET must include workplace learning as a key component of learning

The main employment in Lawson township is with government organisations or with private employers. In both cases there were few opportunities for Indigenous people to gain employment or train locally for ongoing employment. There is little evidence of effective attempts by private employers to collaborate to change this situation.

There are limited training opportunities associated with the extensive spread of Community Development Employment Programs (CDEP) for Indigenous people in both remote communities and through town camp organisations. Because of Indigenous reluctance to move away from homelands and community, the main opportunities for work and training outside of CDEP are in health, welfare, education (particularly for women) and manual trades (for men). The more remote the community, the more likely CDEP was the primary employer and the de facto VET provider. Interviewees suggested the need for improved collaboration between ATSIC, CDEP and Indigenous community councils to ensure Indigenous VET opportunities are created within CDEP.

A special Student Access Project designed specifically for 'youth at risk' has proved successful for some Indigenous secondary school students in Lawson by offering generic skills related to personal development and broad computer knowledge. From the perspective of trainees, peer pressure against self-improvement contributes to the drop-out rate while paid, on-the-job training is viewed positively.

VET must be customised to specific Indigenous needs, including literacy and language

The direct and indirect effect of high levels of first (and often second and third) language Indigenous verbal literacy combined with low levels of formal English literacy make access to formal English language VET and employment based on formal literacy particularly problematic. A large number of first language and Kriol speakers represented by providers and community organisations across the Lawson site create a need to anticipate and assist Indigenous learners acquire English language competencies.

The source and 'reasons' for this 'problem' and the 'answers' will always be culturally constructed, Funding, particularly for programs which accommodate for or address the high prevalence of Indigenous verbal literacy and low levels of formal English and numeracy, is perceived to be a primary inhibitor of quality learning in the Lawson area. Some of the more remote areas had a very high demand for such programs but government funding proved unavailable. It was claimed by one interviewee that the Education and Training Authority for the region prefers to fund courses that are employment oriented and have employment outcomes. From the perspective of training providers it is very difficult to tailor programs for varying, often minimal English literacy levels. This factor depresses access and outcomes and also inhibits the quality of the learner experience. Funding also affects equality of opportunity and choice in relation to the range of courses available. The cutbacks in funding after the change in government in 1996 resulted in some institutions being unable to offer traineeships or renew their RTO status.

Indigenous communities have their own training agendas and different communities have different agendas. For example, the women of one community had allocated $3000 toward training for community women who assist victims of domestic violence. These agendas hold a central position for these people and need attention in the negotiated planning process rather than be seen as potential impediments to consistent national VET implementation. Those interviewed in 2000 noted that opportunities had been reduced in some remote communities because some organisations have had to cut back on training due to funding withdrawal from Indigenous training projects.

Productive outcomes were apparent in 2000 from a model of regional, Indigenous-controlled provision of Indigenous community health with opportunities for Indigenous control of community learning associated with that initiative. This initiative was in its infancy in 1999. Respondents reported that training delivered to Indigenous communities in 1999 had positive outcomes in 2000 in terms of improvement in the communities' physical environments.

The white experience of VET

Apprenticeships and traineeships are seen to be oriented primarily to the needs of the non-Indigenous community. Strong networks exist among businesses, government and community organisations and training providers serving the non-Indigenous population, ensuring a close match between VET needs and provision.

There are extremely limited community, literacy and language opportunities for adults in Lawson, particularly for non-Indigenous people. However, people resist commitment to attend specific literacy programs. It was suggested that it would be more successful to more fully resource the integration of literacy into other training courses, thus making it more relevant to current activities. There was a perception from the 2000 organisation representative interviewees that young people's VET needs were being met 'poorly' or 'very poorly' in the Lawson site. Training delivered by some of the interviewees in 1999 had led to new jobs in about one half of cases.

The education and training needs of the main Lawson employer are met largely by internal training and external recruitment with little evidence of outside partnerships or collaboration. Training for the pastoral and horticulture industries is provided by accredited providers and the department of primary industries, which collaborates with its interstate counterparts to deliver relevant training.

Collaborations and networks

Most organisations, providers and others in this site appear to have multiple links with a variety of other organisations. There is a perceived need for public providers to collaborate in the isolation and thin training market of this region.

> We all know each other. If I had a problem, I would ring them up. When I first started acting in this position, every one of them and rang me up and said, 'if I can be of assistance in the next few weeks, ring me. It's a steep learning curve, so just give me a call'. The Territory is too small, I mean there is friendly rivalry, we are all after bottoms on seats, we are after ACH hours, but we are not into sneaking against each other. (Acting Director of a public provider institution)

The region's Education and Training Authority (ETA) plays a coordinating role for VET in Lawson, attracting students and working with providers and various community (including Indigenous) and industry organisations across the region. ETA is essentially the facilities manager for VET in Lawson, and is involved in apprenticeship and traineeship brokerage. NTETA facilitates regular meetings of the directors of the main four public institutions offering VET. This training provider from one college describes specialisation among providers and a manageable degree of competition for students in duplicated courses:

> The School of Horticulture for the Regional University teach horticulture and landcare studies. So there's a bit of a competition there in the landcare studies area with us. We teach mainly entry level training into the pastoral industry... another college... are only indigenous and sort of more in the social sciences area... a different college again, do a little bit of rural, pastoral type training. But also their main core business is in office administration, and in butchery and in hospitality and some of the apprentices, so there's an overlap between us, but because there's... 2000K between X and Y, your local TAFE provider is your local choice... We all offer computing skills and office skills and all those sorts of generic things... So there's competition in those areas for those students. But in our main core business... there's an overlap but it's not 100% overlap.

Crossing the racial divide

A Student Access program at the Lawson High School is one of few successful collaborative efforts that cross the Indigenous/non-Indigenous VET divide. Originally available only to Indigenous students, it was expanded on the strength of demand from non-Indigenous students. The program, for those aged 16+ without an established education or work pathway, has seen 66 of its 80 participants placed in work over its five-year life. It draws heavily on partnerships with businesses and community organisations for its success.

There is little other evidence of a coherent or collaborative learning community in the Lawson township which crosses that divide. Rather, there is evidence of a proliferation of a number of education and training providers, but with limited program range at the thin, upper end of the non-Indigenous market.

Discussion

The Lawson community is divided very much on racial lines in terms of education and employment opportunities. There are, in effect, two broad sets of partnerships in the Lawson township: a dispersed set of tightly networked Indigenous organisations demarcated on the basis of Indigenous language and culture, and a large number of competing non-Indigenous organisations. The divisions become unhelpful in terms of the broader outcomes subsequent to VET, particularly if people want work and want to access networks which span the racial and cultural divides. The Lawson site, being so divided, provides examples of rural and remote Indigenous and non-Indigenous VET side by side. As long as the separateness persists, some but not all of the issues will also be contested and different.

The high mobility of Indigenous and non-Indigenous people into and across the site, including VET staff, results in lack of continuity in institutional knowledge and program continuity. This has an impact on the potential for developing collaborative working arrangements across multiple divides.

People outside the township of Lawson, in particular the high proportion of the rural and remote Indigenous people, have very few opportunities for vocational learning (or indeed work) outside of the Indigenous 'Work for the Dole' scheme, CDEP, or other community work. The VET partnerships within these rural and remote communities are restricted to those traditional, strong and long-standing relationships between local Indigenous community organisations and enterprises (as the main employers) and CDEP.

The terms 'TAFE', 'VET' and 'ACE' have little local currency in Lawson, either as providers or as programs. Most provision by the two main universities with a presence in Lawson would be regarded as TAFE in other Australian contexts since it tends to be access or vocationally oriented and tied to servicing local, individual and industry needs (particularly in hospitality, retail, health, education, rural studies, basic trades).

There is a feeling of isolation in the region generally and of the Lawson towns and communities in particular from other learning organisations, institutions and networks. This feeling, when combined with a clear racial divide, creates a sense of 'frontier' about Lawson that pervades its adult learning organisations. There is deep collaboration, both overt and covert, across most community organisations based on cultural, mainly racial and clan lines.

Conclusion

The story of the Lawson area is the story of variation in socio-cultural and associated VET needs. Collaboration is strong within this divided community, but few collaborative links cross the boundaries of the multiple divides.

In summary, VET configurations are characterised by duplication of effort and resources within as well as between Indigenous and non-Indigenous VET. Where collaboration exists between Indigenous organisations, this collaboration is based on a shared Indigenous history, values and cultural aspirations. Collaboration appears to be strongest between Indigenous community organisations in the remotest locations. There are strong linkages between organisations, provider and others, in the non-Indigenous community. Competition between provider organisations exists, but providers are conscious of a need to share the thin market, and the need to maintain distinctly different core areas of training specialisation.

Culturally appropriate flexible delivery for Indigenous students is not compatible with cost-effective print-based or electronic self-paced learning materials. The level of literacy and numeracy and English language support needed for remote Indigenous communities to access VET is not well recognised by national funding formulae. Provision of culturally appropriate VET is a challenge characterised by the high cost of delivering culturally appropriate VET to a population requiring a high level of learning support.

6

BELLBIRD: Few VET options for people on the land

They need some sort of focal point here ... I think we are too isolated in a sense. There's no TAFE ... I don't think there ever would be. People don't like to travel to learn. If there was something put in front of them, they would do it. If they've got to travel ... it's not viable.

Bellbird B small business owner with trade apprentices

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SITE SNAPSHOT

The Bellbird township (population 3000) is situated on a floodplain, around three hours by car from the state's capital city. The Bellbird site as sampled in 2000 consists primarily of rural and remote communities from two states including two rural communities of 500 people: Bellbird A and Bellbird B and the tiny, remote communities of Bellbird C (70), Bellbird D (15) and Bellbird E (a district only). Agriculture is the largest employer in the site. There is intensive farming towards the south of the site including dairying, some viticulture, stone and citrus fruit and other high productivity horticulture. As the country gets drier there is more broad-acre grazing (sheep and cattle) and grain, including irrigated rice. The fastest growing industry sectors are in health and community services and property and business services. The three largest towns have mixed retail and service centres and related industries. The smaller, remote communities are almost totally dependent on industries directly or indirectly associated with rangeland sheep farming for wool.

The proportion of people aged 15-24 decreased by 25% between 1986 and 1996 while the proportion over 65 increased by over 30%. The skills mix of Bellbird is similar to other rural sites examined in this report. While Bellbird has the highest proportion of 'managers' among the ten sites, this statistic probably reflects the high proportion of people who manage rural properties in the site. Participation at TAFE in 1996 was second lowest among the study sites and university attendance was lowest among the sites. It is likely that if these trends shown here continue, there will be particular skills shortage in the region.

Bellbird, being located midway but at some distance from two major regional TAFE providers, has a shared TAFE campus. Formal VET in the site is limited primarily to this TAFE facility in Bellbird as well as the small amount of TAFE outreach or extension in a neighbouring state. VET-in-schools programs are available in a number of regional centres around the Bellbird site. All towns, even the smallest communities, have a very dense web of community, industry and enterprise-based organisations with opportunities for informal learning. Given the relatively low profile of TAFE in the site, these community organisations act as important surrogate learning organisations.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS:

A ***Changes and context***

2 What are the key factors driving these changes (global, national, regional and local)?

B ***Configurations***

3 What are the different configurations of VET provision occurring and how do they relate to these changes?

5 How do the different configurations of VET provision meet the changing needs of stakeholders?

ISSUES:

Distance, small size of community, collaboration, flexible delivery, learning to manage natural resources (in agriculture)

Introduction

The quotation at the start of this case study stresses the importance of physical infrastructure to provide a focal point for community learning within a community and region. There is no TAFE, and not much likelihood of getting one in a small remote rural town. Travel is a barrier to formal learning, in terms of time available, poverty and lack of public transport. Flexible delivery, including online delivery has the potential to overcome some of these barriers, but has not yet been widely embraced in this site.

The case provides a profile of a remote rural community's struggles to become a learning community. It therefore assists in answering Research Questions 2 and 3, especially those sections related to identifying the key factors driving changes, the on-the-ground nature of different configurations of VET provision and why they emerged, as well as touching on how the different configurations of VET provision meet the changing needs of stakeholders in this community. The case covers issues of distance, a theme common in places where agriculture is a major industry, and flexible delivery, a potential way of overcoming the tyranny of distance, at least as far as VET is concerned.

Distance

Across the whole site, much of the interviewing focussed on people working and living in smaller communities or on the land. Community collaboration between small enterprises, learning and community organisations increases with increasing remoteness and decreasing town size in this site. This is the positive side to distance and VET. The negative side is the cost and time of travel to access VET, difficulty in finding suitably qualified teachers and trainers for part-time and relief work and the limited and inadequate choice of courses, including professional development programs for teachers and trainers.

Collaboration — Making the most of VET

Collaboration in planning, negotiating and delivering VET is apparent in the large and small communities in this site. Key to the success of this collaborative activity seems to be a coordinator with extensive networks in place who has the skills to work these networks, as well as a community with a shared commitment to training. This is evident in other sites as well, especially Emu Springs. As community size decreases, the causes of lack of collaboration are more likely to be personal and family related rather than formal, bureaucratic or institutional. Conversely, as community size increases to towns the size of Bellbird, a lack of collaboration in relation to learning is more likely to be motivated by competition, and result in inefficient use of resources. What is striking, is the minimal collaborative networks which cross State boundaries, even in adjacent communities.

Competition policy is often seen to put collaboration between providers at risk. The three main providers in Bellbird each concentrated on different areas in the past but are now openly competing and duplicating programs. A restructure of previously shared provision arrangements of TAFE in Bellbird between two major regional providers was under way in 2000.

> Take… Information Technology at Certificate 2, they were supplying and providing exactly the same courses we are, using exactly the same teachers… It means that both institutions… have had to spend more money trying to get viable class sizes to do exactly the same course, with exactly the same teachers, there is no economic benefit.

> This open-competition policy in a small town like this is appalling... In a big metropolis like [State capital city] where ... the client base is very big, that's different. But in a small country community where we all eat and live and make a living and send our kids to school and whatever else ... we know our competitors... They're wasting their time or they're using resources to try and win money to win bums on seats. ... That to me is doubling up on resources ... vying for the same small cake for the same relatively few farm apprentices.

The TAFE representative regrets forced competition and works around it for the best interests of students, as in this example of competition with ACE:

> Despite the fact that we're in competition with the Bellbird Learning Centre, they run a very, very good organisation and we respect what they do, it's just that they have been forced into competing with us, not from their own will but from State Government... A woman rang me the other day and wanted to do a computer course. Now we offer computer courses at Bellbird TAFE, [but] she had inadvertently rung the wrong number... So I said what is it that you want and she said I want a beginners course in computing... so I said I will ring [ACE provider] and let them know what you are wanting... they won't be there, they're on holidays... That's an example of how and why we need to know what's going on in the community, so that we can refer people to other organisations.

Government policy can strain effective working arrangements in local communities. However, as the above example indicated there are examples of positive collaboration in meeting local needs. The Bellbird dairy industry is a good example of long and successful traditions of VET collaboration. The Bellbird TAFE in particular has worked closely with the dairy industry to develop an award winning dairy employee training program. The TAFE representative talks of links with several industry organisations, government agencies and individual farm enterprises:

> Our links with the community have only grown. I'm happy to say that we've got very strong links with industry like Regional Herd Development which is a 600-strong dairy farmer cooperative, with individual farmers, we have a very strong and active agricultural advisory committee in the region... We have strong links with our state's Dairy Farmers Association and with the state's Farmers Federation, they're some of the key bodies that are local which have influence on what we do and how we do it... To give you some idea over a period of 3 years, farm apprentices here in Bellbird visit and work with and have open discussions with over a hundred farmers in the 3 years. So we have links with a very wide variety of people at the sharp end of interest, of industry. They are some of the organisations, others are some of the Government agencies.

The key ingredients for past success here appear to have been a particularly well networked TAFE campus coordinator committed to working with the community and industry to meet all the stakeholders needs. This example illustrates a community and industry highly interested and involved in a VET program's development; and careful selection of highly trained teachers:

> ... it's not just [name of person] on his own doing it, it's [name of person] plus the other teachers plus the community, that has a huge input and interest in what goes on here through the Agricultural Advisory Committee... This community is a very special community, rural community, in that it puts it's money where it's mouth is, and that's partly the reason why the completion rates are so high here because there's huge community interest monitoring of what goes on...
>
> The key ingredients are the extraordinary community input into this course by farmers and other people. ... we've got an extraordinary community that takes an active interest and role in training. ...

Distance – A barrier to effective VET

In smaller communities, people have to go to considerable lengths to negotiate training delivery. As one enterprise person explained:

> R: There's a lot available but it is up to you usually to organise it and that's always the factor, you have to ring, get the funding or get the tutor, organise the travel, organise the accommodation and all that takes a lot of effort.
>
> I: It's not just buying it off the shelf?
>
> R: No it's not just one phone [call]… it's usually always community organised.

VET for both young people and adults is constrained in the part of the Bellbird site that extends into another state by being beyond the reach of major providers (universities, major regional TAFEs) and in some communities even ACE. The nature and location of many rural industries and enterprises puts opportunities for participating in (or providing) most formal VET programs beyond reach as a consequence of unrealistic or uneconomic commuting distances. People who want VET programs are forced, as explained above, to organise groups for others to bring this training to them, with its attendant expense and limitations.

Young people do not always succeed in their education and training when faced with managing finances and independent living in unfamiliar larger centres. As well, the money that their families could otherwise spend locally goes to support them in larger cities and towns, withdrawing money from already declining rural towns.

Remoteness and decreasing community size across the Bellbird site increases the need for (but not necessarily the presence of) collaboration. Small and coherent communities with strong community networks and within commuting distance of larger centres (for example, Bellbird A) have more options than more isolated communities. It is the isolated towns away from major arterial roads (such as Bellbird B) that are finding it most difficult to provide appropriate learning, including vocational learning, for its adults. Communities which have no secondary school, VET or adult learning facility (or a surrogate learning organisation) are finding it most difficult to keep and attract people to live and work there, let alone provide appropriate and industry relevant education and training. In such situations it has been left, by default, to local government to sustain community by facilitating community collaboration and thinking on a regional scale, as well as networking outside of the region.

Once settlements get really small in this site (population of less than 100 people), surrogate learning organisations and locations become prominent. These typically include organisations connected to the local hotel, school, store or sporting organisation. The extent to which people can learn in small or isolated communities beyond commuting distance is often tied up with accessibility to family and community networks.

Professional development of teachers and trainers

Other problems relating to distance which were outlined by interviewees focussed on the professional development of VET-in-schools teachers. These teachers need to be qualified to deliver quality VET courses; that is, to meet certain benchmarks that are not just school related but that meet the needs of industry standards. Problems of access to professional development courses, however, in terms of distances travelled and a shortage of relief teachers, are a barrier to learning for VET providers themselves.

> [One of the site states] has pretty rigid qualifications for teachers with a heavy emphasis on industry. There are programs that enable teachers to remain conversant with industry standards and there is an expectation that they do so… you run into the problem that

> with the best will in the world there is such a severe shortage of casual part time teachers that in many cases teachers can't take up the option, because they just simply can't be replaced. So you're looking at not only costs of replacement but you're looking at cost of travel, accommodation. Safety issues… you get back at 11 o'clock at night, you're dodging kangaroos all the way home, so there are some barriers for teachers definitely.

Lack of access to professional development has flow-one effects to the range of courses that are provided in the site. An informant from a Bellbird secondary school, for example noted a restricted course range due to the availability of resources and cited the example of a demand for child care courses which could not be filled due to insufficient workplace trainers and assessors.

Flexible delivery: On-line or …?

There is little evidence that VET learners in this site are embracing online or electronic delivery other than through informal learning. Policy makers perceive flexible delivery of courses in smaller centres as widely desirable although the economics and logistics of such provision make it uncommon. A training provider acknowledged the problems for online delivery for people with learning difficulties, those who lacked study skills or were not motivated, and people who were not computer literate. Flexible delivery, while not ideal, may be the only option to obtain a qualification for people with other commitments such as a job and family. Electronic delivery was, however, seen as inferior.

> Our link with [other town] as a RTO [Registered Training Organisation] with the hospitality… our kids aren't getting anywhere near the good deal that the [other town] kids are… same with the electronics. It's difficult to run a practical course when the kids are just sitting in front of a computer, learning the theory.
>
> I can speak as a trained provider and also personally, I've done all my degree and a graduate diploma all by distance, a bit of it over the Internet, in the last couple of years and quite frankly it's very stressful and very difficult and if you've got a young family I can't imagine how… I would never do it again.

The difficulties of flexible delivery through on-line delivery carries with it considerable constraints for many. However, other forms of flexible delivery, where stakeholders collaborate to provide training would seem to be highly successful. In addition a range of learning strategies are used by those isolated by distance and remoteness.

In this site, on-the-job training is provided on a flexible procurement (as distinct from flexible delivery) basis. Commonly, groups of landowners in a particular rural area (e.g. dairy farmers, rice farmers, irrigators) collaborate and negotiate with a particular provider or industry organisation to provide training on site or in a community facility. The costs of travel (and, if necessary, accommodation) are borne by the procurers of the training. Training providers can, in longer or accredited programs, act as assessors and monitor trainees' progress such as for the Farm Chemical Users course.

Ease of access to courses is improved when training providers conduct workshops or courses on site in this way, though the costs, even when divided between the procurers of training, can be significant. In some cases residents of small towns act in a similar, collaborative manner with landowners to procure on-site training used across the community, such as computer courses, and more recently Internet and GST compliance courses.

The farmers in this site showed a willingness to learn by using the Internet, expert consultants, print-based material and even material sent regularly be fax as sources for informal and nonformal learning. Typical learning for the changes that were made by farmers is described by a wool grower as being:

> …through reading and through access to consultants, we pay a subscription and they send us anything they think we need to know, so probably our fax machine is our biggest educational tool.

Discussion

Competition between local service providers, which has been stimulated by Federal and State policy, is seen as an inefficient use of scarce resources in this site. As a result of the Hilmer Report and the competition policy that drove it, several of the local providers in the Bellbird site are marketing the same courses, ironically using the same resources and tutors in many cases. It was generally believed that competition would boost the effectiveness and quality of service, but this principle does not always apply to towns of small population. Each provider is spending time and resources competing in such areas as advertising and promotion to run the same course. Problems relating to the thin market are particularly evident in an example given where most of the institutions are competing with TAFE for the same half dozen apprentices in a field. This duplication of courses and the resultant inefficiency is perceived by respondents, as poor use of public funding.

In small communities, collaboration and competition are not mutually exclusive. The basis of the collaboration (or lack of it) is often historic, but usually informal and reliant on personal rather than institutional relationships. Some of the (apparently) most obvious opportunities for competition, such as between ACE and Neighbourhood Houses or between public providers of VET are systematically avoided to preserve status quo or because of unstated historic (but sensible and economically rational) demarcation of training territory. In a sense, there has been a deliberate and widely agreed community-based segmentation of the roles of different learning communities. The trusts associated with this segmentation and agreement have been strained through the implementation of competition policies.

There is evidence from all locations in this site that adults, particularly people working on the land, are often working a number of part-time jobs and managing small businesses to make ends meet. This need has been exacerbated by prolonged drought and irrigation water deficit. There is evidence that the incidence of off-farm work has changed in the past decade for a range of reasons. Women are playing a pivotal role in change and restructure both on- and off-farm. The changing nature of work simultaneously increases the need for learning new skills and reduces the opportunity (time) for participation in VET. The main vocational learning partnerships are between couples working on the land and in small businesses. Formal VET training providers play a relatively small role in vocational learning for farming couples. Most learning is done by doing, reading, through informal networks or as one rice farmer said, 'looking over the neighbour's fence'.

At the time of interviewing, the major private provider was under review in terms of its quality provision. ACE in Bellbird was also re-examining its options both in the site and as part of a regional ACE cluster. Outside of Bellbird in both site states there is evidence that TAFE outreach and extension services are on the decline. Major providers to much of this site appear to be at risk in one way or another.

In the more isolated communities in this site, where there is no formal VET provision the success and direction of VET providers and surrogate community-based learning organisations (for example, local fire, water or irrigation authorities) is based very much on the ability of the coordinator or president to network in the community. The direction a provider or organisation takes is dependent on (and in some cases limited by) the interests and skills of its leader.

Within the formal VET provision in this site, the time a coordinator has been in the position is a factor in the success of the services they provide. This factor is two-edged. In some small communities people in teaching and coordination positions find it hard to get a better job. Indeed there is a general concern that VET providers are unable to attract quality teachers for the provision communities require. Some VET staff stay longer than they intended and achieve promotion and seniority by staying in the one position. Some VET coordinators in this site admitted to having been in town 'too long'. In the context of considerable external change, some had a sense of 'digging in' and 'carrying on regardless'. On the other hand, the wisdom and the rich networks that come with time and experience in the one place can be lost when and if people move on. In other sites, local enabling leadership has been noted as helping in such situations and could well be employed in this site. This kind of leadership would, however, need specific professional development to engender it.

Flexible delivery using electronic materials (online or CD-based) is only a partial answer for overcoming the 'tyranny' of distance as far as VET is concerned in this site. There is a need to rethink support for learners and ways of delivering any off the job practical component of courses in areas such as electronics and hospitality. The Possum Point case study presents a more positive example of flexible delivery at a distance.

Conclusion

The site is notable for a number of reasons. It has a relative lack of learning organisations in declining communities. Nevertheless, with increasing remoteness there is an increasing need and desire by people in farm enterprises and in small towns to learn, adapt and adjust to change. People living on the land in particular need to learn how to come to terms with the widespread negative impacts of reduced water quantity and quality as well as salinity on rural productivity. However, there are restricted and decreasing opportunities for learning for people living on the land. Much learning on the land is informal or non-formal. Town size is only one factor. Two towns of similar size (e.g. Bellbird A and Bellbird B) have completely different communities, learning structures and opportunities by virtue of their different history and location.

Young people tend to leave for their education and do not return to the area to live or work, if at all, until mid-life. There is evidence that early school leavers have very limited and poor-quality alternative learning options, even in larger rural towns. For that reason, TAFE is mainly used by older people changing direction and only by young people as a last resort. ACE is used largely by women. From other research it is known that men on the land do very little post-school formal learning. People on the land make extensive use of informal learning from print and electronic media and learn through networks of experts and other farmers. While formal VET meets most needs of rural enterprises for apprentices and technical courses such Farm Chemical Accreditation, it does not meet the needs of other emerging enterprises. Other community-based learning organisations have tended to be more flexible in terms of changing to meet individual and community need.

Most formal VET in the Bellbird site remains face to face though most vocational learning is informal or non-formal and on the job. There is evidence of private providers receiving subsidies and payment to employers who train workers on the job in situations where virtually little or no formal learning can be documented. There is evidence also that farmers in particular are becoming extensive information users of the Web, rather than formal learners. A need was identified for support for students who are learning via electronic means in terms of interaction with trainers and peers and development of independent learning skills.

In summary, Bellbird township is well served by VET and ACE infrastructure but poorly served by a range of quality accredited programs. Competition has led to inefficiencies. Beyond commuting distance of Bellbird or other regional cities, people on the land in small

towns or rural and remote areas have very limited and decreasing vocational learning options. Flexible delivery has yet to overcome the barriers imposed by distance.

7

BRIDGETOWN: Networks of influence: Effective VET partnerships

[Name of 0rganisation] co-ordinates the activities of a range of people from local colleges (High Schools), TAFE colleges, the Bridgetown Chamber of Commerce, industry, other industry associations involved with training, commerce ... training companies and government departments and tries to bring all those groups together to facilitate this whole school-to-[work process].
(CEO of a Group Training Company)

Well what I think [Name of community based organisation] does really is give the government value for money inasmuch as it brings together a lot of networks like us — like Group Training Companies — like Schools — and says hey let's have a look and see if there is duplication of programs — if there is a gap ...
(Executive Officer of a community-based youth training organisation)

There's a greater sharing of information across the schools which is really key. And employer groups and community-based organisations and area consultative committee people now have access to each other and to the schools in a centralised way. In a way that they recognise as legitimate and valid.
(Executive Officer of a community-based organisation)

SITE SNAPSHOT

The Bridgetown site is located approximately 200km from its state's capital city. The site includes the city of Bridgetown (population 67 701), the towns of Bridgetown A (4522) and Bridgetown B (343), and the community of Bridgetown C (190), about 100km to the north east of Bridgetown. The local economy is primarily a mixed one. The most important areas of employment by sector are: community services (health, education); wholesale and retail trade, and manufacturing. Industries include: agriculture, fishing, forestry, finance, property, business services, tourism and recreation. The whole region is a major manufacturing region, mainly in and around Bridgetown and Bridgetown A, with the most significant employment areas being in wood, wood products and furniture, basic metal products, and food and beverage processing. The region also has a strong agricultural base with dairy and wool constituting 41% of agricultural production. Viticulture and tourism are becoming of increasing importance in terms of the local economy.

Unemployment at the 1996 Census was relatively high at 11.2% compared to 9.0% for the nation. Employment growth generated by emerging industry groups was insufficient to counteract the negative effects of job losses caused by rationalisations in heavy manufacturing, transport and storage industries. If the growth trends continue in the hospitality, tourism and personal services industries, more opportunities for employment, particularly for youth, may emerge.

Access to a wide range of education facilities (including TAFE and university) have resulted in a qualifications profile better than the average for the 10 study sites in this report. The downturn in manufacturing, however, has contributed to virtually no growth in vocational skills for the region. Participation at TAFE and university in 1996 was relatively high in relation to the other sites, and compared favourably with national averages.

The site has a range of VET provision, primarily centred in Bridgetown: TAFE (three main campuses), University and the Australian [name removed] College, VET in schools, group training companies and a number of private training providers. In-house training, VET in schools and online centres are the primary sources of VET located at the intermediate and remote sites, although Bridgetown B includes a public provider in the form of a forestry training operation. Each of the Bridgetown-based providers also services the small communities in the site through flexible delivery.

Note: Further information on the site is available in Attachment 2 pp. 60–63; CRLRA 2000 *Managing Change through VET* report p. 102). For information about changes in VET between 1999 and 2000 see Attachment 2 pp. 62–64. For further information about this site also see Attachment 1 p. 63; Attachment 2 pp. 60–65 and CRLRA 2000 *Managing Change through VET* pp. 141–142.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS:

C *Effectiveness*

6 How effective are the different configurations of VET provision in meeting the needs of the stakeholders?

7 What actions should be taken to improve effectiveness of VET in meeting stakeholders' needs in various regions?

ISSUES:

Collaboration, structures and procedures, relationships

Partnerships and collaboration: Power to lead

The quote that heads this case study is typical of many across all sites. It illustrates the power of enabling leadership in developing sustainable VET practices in regions. This site, Bridgetown and environs , has many examples of organisations that use their networks of influence to gain information and opportunities related to VET. Some of these will be described later in this case study.

This case study will help illustrate the answer to Research Questions 6 and 7. It illustrates the effectiveness of configurations in Research Question 6 through presenting a vignette, which is followed by a table showing the impact of various players on various levels of stakeholder. The concluding section draws out the response to Research Question 7 concerning actions that will improve the effectiveness of VET in meeting community needs.

Before the vignette, the multiplicity of players in collaborations and the considerable number and variety of changes at the site between the 1999 and 2000 interviews are outlined.

Multiplicity of players in collaborations

At the core of the reason for networks being powerful lies the old adage, 'knowledge is power'. Knowing people at all levels in the community and tiers of government, knowing peoples' strengths, knowing where information can be acquired, knowing who controls what types of information, knowing how organisations and institutions work, knowing how to find out things that aren't already known – all these areas of *knowing* provide VET leaders with the tools of their trade. This is the reason why bonding ties, those links and networks people share in 'closed' communities, are only useful to a point. In the life of any community, it becomes essential to manage inevitable changes by learning to control those influences. Control is achieved by understanding, and understanding relies on knowing.

The range of organisations and individuals concerned with vocational education and training in this community is overwhelming. One provider summarised the VET players, all potential partners in any VET collaboration, as follows:

> [There is…] a private computer training company, a training company, the new [State] Online through the library, there's the standard — TAFE, there's the University, there's [local hospitality college] which is probably part of TAFE, there is some of the Jobnet groups, like [the] Group Training [Company], there was one that was in [inner suburb], there's Skillshare. A number of those groups have been involved with training. There's been a variety of community groups offering scholarships for both TAFE or specialised training as well as the University, whether that's the Australian Federation of University Women, the Business and Professional Women, Soroptimist, the Rotary Clubs with their exchange programs as well as their scholar programs, so there's a number of community groups, such as the groups involved in promoting education and supporting education programs. There would be the traineeships and I know that the Bridgetown Council has been quite involved in those both at the museum as well as in the normal — what people think of as Bridgetown City Council, the offices as well as the trades, maintenance and works. There's the Greencorps that's been active in the area; whether some of the participants have actually done their programs here in the community or have gone through the process of being selected and going elsewhere, I've only heard of students being involved in other programs , but I understand that there's the opportunity of choosing to go elsewhere for them. There's City Mission, the program

> they have out at [name of hamlet]… similar to Jobnet based in town, there's Fusion… that has a number of programs, particularly for what some would call 'displaced persons'….There truly is a lot that is happening that's not in that list also.

The multiplicity of players in collaborations is here evident, as is the range of factors that determines who becomes (or *should* become) a player. The case of VET in schools is a good demonstration of the multiplicity of factors involved in effective VET configurations, and this is reported later in this case study.

Changes

The vast majority of training providers, employers and community organisations in the site are in some form of VET collaborative partnership and most of those have two or more collaborators in the relationship. The collaborative partners themselves perceive that successful healthy relationships, whether with individual clients or groups, are of great importance in enhancing successful learning environments and their outcomes. It seems that significant relationships between providers and clients are on the increase and this is having a positive effect on outcomes in terms of networking and self efficacy of individuals and organisations.

There has been considerable positive change in this site in the 12-month period from 1999 to 2000:

- An increased range of courses is available, with continual changes being made to the range of training packages and courses offered by most institutions. Schools have added to their range of VET courses. Collaboration between District High Schools in the provision of different courses has increased the options available to rural students. A number of the interviewees mentioned the uncertainty of delivery of some University courses. The VET providers in the site have not changed significantly over the last 12 months, other than an increase in the number of District High Schools who reported an intention to provide VET courses. There is some concern over the limited number of work placements available and limited employment opportunities for graduating students;

- In terms of VET and Indigenous clients it would seem that growth in participation has followed positive VET experiences of Indigenous leaders. Indigenous teachers/facilitators of courses aimed at the Indigenous population have also had a positive effect on student participation, although there is room for further increases in participation by this group;

- Flexible delivery is becoming an important focus for providers with a wider range of topics and choices. TAFE is increasing flexibility and attempting to implement an increasingly client-centred approach. Increasing Indigenous student numbers reflect the success of the client-centred approach for this group;

- Some of the changes that have been made to cut costs of training have increased customisation, for example, a local government body has developed in-house training, thereby cutting costs. Other changes were the result of client services reviews and/or reviews of Training Packages in conjunction with particular industry needs. Another factor being taken into account is the need for training content to be relevant to jobs or work placements available in the community;

- Private providers appear to be making inroads into the viticulture training market and are becoming well accepted in the wider training market;

- Most organisations either using or delivering VET services have grown in some way. Most have added courses to what they already provide or seek to provide for their organisation. Changes in method of delivery have not been significant other than to report the continual development of the client base of the online centres. Local councils are developing strategies that are more balanced in the way they make training and learning opportunities available to their employees. Councils are providing an increase in internal courses made available to employees, thereby complementing successful external courses that have been provided in the past. This is an example of 'mix and match' of training to suit enterprise requirements so as to provide workers with portable, recognised skills. It is also an indication of the training model chosen by the enterprise, for example, a 'market oriented' enterprise, gives priority to problem solving and entrepreneurial skills, which has implications for the providers;

- Attitudes towards training on the part of employers and the wider population are changing with an increasing value placed on training and ongoing learning. Most employers interviewed believe that training will improve their employees' work performance.

The story is not all positive, however, which is unsurprising given the complexity of resourcing, policy and other contextual features. A major public training provider in the Bridgetown area cited quality education and training and participation in employment as two major issues for the future.

Vocational learning quality issues

Some interesting information arose from the questionnaire returns in relation to quality vocational learning. In summary, these are:

- A minority felt local institutions were not listening to the needs of the community and their course requests;

- A community representative in one of the remote areas noted a considerable improvement in the distance education product in the last five years but said much still depended on computer access, which was not readily available to all;

- Opportunities for further learning were restricted for many by a lack of regular transport;

- The range of courses available in VET programs in rural and remote parts of the site is perceived as poor with some of the rural high schools still not geared or staffed for teaching VET programs;

- A major community business organisation cited a need for marketing the value of VET to employers because there was little understanding of VET programs in the broader community;

- A major organisation representative also said the biggest single complaint in the Bridgetown area about the 'products' of the education system was that of poor attitude and limited work ethic. This is indicative of employers now expecting employees to be work ready. The location of the responsibility for this type of training appears to have shifted from the employer to the individual and the school. This perceived deficiency in attitude and work ethic may relate to the quality of learning in terms of job-readiness and workplace relevance;

- There is a perception that restructuring of TAFE has allowed the need for profit to compromise the professionalism of the VET outcomes, a fact that undermines client confidence;
- There was quality concern about quality issues when it comes to assessment;
- Competition policy is perceived to inhibit collaboration because of thin markets at the remote and rural sites;
- There is a polarised view of governments' role. Top-down government approaches are perceived as stifling local initiatives and enthusiasm. Conversely, there is perceived to be a lack of government support and facilitation of local initiatives. This was manifested in government under- or defunding, and funding uncertainty. Legal and bureaucratic formalities and procedures all impede collaboration, one outcome is volunteers discontinuing their services;
- Generally in the Bridgetown area, funding was perceived as the main inhibitor to quality learning, particularly in terms of equipment and resources.

Many of these issues are common across case studies and are also relevant in the ensuing discussion about effectiveness of VET.

Effectiveness of VET

With increasingly individualised provision, clients, employers, community organisations and individuals are becoming more discerning and demanding in their expectations of VET provision and delivery. Some providers report that some of these expectations are unrealistic and place a lot of stress on staff. Much 'behind the scenes' work needs to be done in supplying an ever-increasing need for flexibility in terms of what is delivered and where, when and how delivery occurs.

Training providers report that youth are fairly well catered for in this site, but some employers and community organisations say that there is still much to be achieved in this regard. Large and small business in the site, according to the interviewees, are reasonably well catered for in terms of provision of VET services, while people needing retraining do not have many options available to them.

While some employers and community organisations have concerns about the quality of the training, many of those interviewed are satisfied with their arrangements. Most individual VET clients interviewed are also satisfied.

Below follows an example of a collaborative VET arrangement which address a number of the issues of the previous section.

Exemplar of collaborative partnership: VET-in-schools program

Vocational education and training often involves a set of partnership arrangements between industry, schools and TAFE who work together to provide training. The training is designed, developed and delivered as a set of industry-based competency course, and includes vocational accreditation, genuine workplace-based experience, and a certain amount of classroom-based coverage of modules. The industry groups are often closely involved in ensuring the training meets industry workplace standards. The resulting partnership arrangements work to a greater or lesser extent, and the vignette outlined here is a good example of the former.

Vignette: VET-in-schools becomes VET for communities

The school had…[a school review] last year…They ended up drawing up what is known as a partnership agreement between the school and the community. And…certain outcomes…are expected from both viewpoints. And that is, I mean, when I first heard about it I was a little bit sceptical, a little bit cynical to be honest. But I think it is a good thing and certainly it provides that framework that you can always refer to. So if something crops up and whether it be an instance of, say, drug abuse at the school, for example, then the community could turn around and say, 'Listen we had a partnership agreement, what measures did you have in place to make sure this didn't happen?' And the school can turn around and say, 'We had a partnership agreement, how come you weren't assisting us in the detection of that?' In other words, it is a framework which enables everybody to know where they stand. And I think it is a good thing.

I mean, and it is a two-way street, I mean, these guys here with the theory work to be done, plus the practice that they have had in going to the vineyards, have a much better understanding now of what is required in the workplace. Not only that, the workplaces themselves have a very good overall view of the type of student coming through. They can test out these students individually. Plus they get an idea through talking among themselves who the good ones are. And the feedback that we have received so far has been very positive from all these guys. I think they will all do very well actually.

Well, certainly, [the name of] High School, who we work closely with, has adopted viticulture as being one of their main areas of study. We actually established our training vineyard on a site that belongs to [the name of] High School and now they share that vineyard with us. And I am involved in some of their training as well on a fairly informal level. They are actually doing Level 1 of our course through their school. Now I see this as a positive move because when we first started offering traineeships to the wine industry, it was very hard to find young people who saw the wine industry as being an opportunity for them. Young people straight out of high school. In other regions of Australia, Mum and Dad worked for a wine company and so son and daughter would often move on [and] work for the wine company. Now here … those links were never there. And so young people leaving school never actually saw that there may be an opportunity in this growing wine industry and often it was people, say, in their mid-20s who started to think that there may be an opportunity in the wine industry. And so the trainees or the traineeships all of a sudden gave young people an opportunity to get into the wine industry. But we have to convince them that there was an opportunity there for them. With the introduction of viticulture training in secondary schools, it does introduce them at that age to this industry, this growing industry. And now they can see that by, not only getting some training at a secondary level and giving them a foot in the door, it also opens their eyes to a whole new industry where there are some great opportunities. So I think it is really another link in providing or getting young people into this exciting industry.

We have got a very good working relationship with TAFE now which hasn't always been the case. And so that has been a positive link, too. The link with the businesses, we have got students who are on work placement one day a week and that is working very well and I go around them, well, I try to get around every organisation that is taking a student every fortnight. So I will go around and talk to them and see how the students are going. See how the organisation feels the course is progressing, etc. Sometimes it is nothing more than, 'G'day, how are you? Is everything okay? Right. See ya.' Other times if they have got a particular issue they would like discuss we will sit down and talk about it. We try to make it a two-way street. Like if there is some particular research idea that they would like us to find out about or something, we will certainly do that. We have been approached by the olive growers group to set up this school here as the training growing course in the State for olive growers. And we are hoping to proceed with that. [The pastoral company] approached us and wanted us to be the service provider for the rural retailing course and they have got about 15 places straight away that they will take workers on. So that is a good idea, too. I can't think of any other ones off hand that are really vital. But undoubtedly if I think about it later on, there are plenty of other organisations.

You have got to have a range of training which will give a potential employment. So in other words if…there were no vineyards in this area and we had our own vineyard here, it would be silly to set up a training course because no-one would be interested in it even though, as I said, it is an Australia-wide accredited course. It would be still be quite difficult to get it organised. You need to have people interested in actually taking it and not just lumped into the area as happens in the majority of cases.

Discussion

The table below summarises the outcomes for participants, and the community more generally:

Outcomes resulting from	For participants	For the community
Collaboration	• Career paths in the viticulture industry • More opportunities for participants • More opportunities for providers	• Enables effective planning to meet local need • Efficient use of resources (eg school vineyard)
Local planning	• Less travel needed, encourages participation • Relevant training better meets student needs	• Leads to effective VET in schools • Better quality VET
Community leadership	Ongoing meeting of local needs	The continuing development of collaborative arrangements to meet local need.
Use of formal agreement(s)	• Participants know the structures they are within • Nationally recognised qualifications	Assists partners in the collaborative arrangement to identify the boundaries of the relationship
Government support and resources	Provides resources to establish and nurture relationships	Provides resources to establish and nurture relationships

In general, the impact of the outcomes (from the areas listed in the lefthand column) on participants, collaboration and VET more widely, is developed and then sustained through continuity of the programs, institutions and collaborative configurations in the region and their history with the communities. This aspect of continuity needs to be modified by the need for evolution of processes and structures that remain constantly responsive to changing local needs, policy and funding conditions. That is, continuity is sustained through ***organisational agility***.

A number of training providers, employers and community organisations stressed the importance of the following as factors that work towards the success of training arrangements:

1. the presence of coordinators at VET sites (especially workplaces);
2. a culture in an organisation or community that values training;
3. well-structured programs and course design focused on individual, employer and community needs, especially when the course content is directly related to immediate job-related needs;
4. cost effectiveness in terms of delivery;

Factors working against the success of training arrangements:

5. some policy issues are of concern to providers, for example, restrictive practices such as TAFE quarantined areas;

6. high costs of TAFE training are of concern, especially to community organisations;

7. access and transport continues to be an issue in rural and remote areas, limiting individuals' choice, especially younger students. Flexibility of delivery in terms of where and how VET is delivered is having only a limited impact on the barrier of distance and transport;

8. there continues to be a gap between the literacy and numeracy requirements of training and the skills of some students;

9. continuing problems have been noted by clients concerning lack of appropriate professional skills on the part of teachers and facilitators of VET. Quality of assessment is an issue. Interviewees reported variation in standards required by different workplace assessors;

10. some inflexibility is still occurring, mainly in relation to badly timed provision of certain courses.

Conclusion

There are many positives in this site, apart from the vignette above, that show how shared vision and goals, when networked across the partnership members, is an enabler of effective collaboration in VET. Many of the partnership relationships have built on successful past network experiences.

Returning to the Research Questions 6 and 7 about effectiveness of configurations of collaborative partners, the guidelines for effective collaborative partnerships can be summarised as follows:

- Instigating of processes that develop the learning community in the location of the VET activity. That is, build the community of those who work within its organisations, ensuring that the relevant aspects of the community's histories are used as resources to meld present planning processes into future visions;

- Establishing processes such as periodic evaluation against criteria that include continuity in the community's two-way links and ongoing networks with their virtual and local communities;

- Auditing community and stakeholder social infrastructure to ensure leadership and networks are present and effective;

- Remaining aware that these relationships are likely to evolve and change over time, and that roles and responsibilities of leaders, personnel and stakeholders will change in response. This organisational agility is crucial for achieving sustainability of effective VET outcomes.

8

HIGHBURY: Complexity in decline and the role of continuity

We both sign it. One of the reasons we do it actually on paper is that...if I get run over by a bus — I'm not going to be here for ever — the next person who comes into this job would be able to say, 'What's this protocol?' and have a look, and say 'Ah, right!' So they don't have to reinvent them, all they have to do is to have a look.

ACE Centre coordinator in a small town talking about a formal memorandum of understanding between community organisations

SITE SNAPSHOT

The Highbury site involves the rural town of Highbury (population 2000) and the smaller, relatively isolated communities of Highbury A (population 250) and Highbury B (population 1000). While Highbury A and Highbury have traditionally seen themselves as having a timber and farming base, Highbury B has been more dependent on coastal tourism and fishing. All three centres provide retail, educational and commercial services centres for local and regional residents, rural farmers and tourists. Defined as 'resource' based, the predominant industry is for the broader region (which includes Highbury C) is actually retail, with agriculture being the primary basis of employment for the eastern part of the region, where the study was centred. The 1996 inter-censal data revealed a community which was losing its young people but retaining its old people. Forestry has traditionally employed many in Highbury and Highbury A, but is now in decline. Among all study sites, 1996 unemployment in the Highbury site was the highest at 13.6%. Full-time employment fell at a relatively high rate compared to other sites between the 1991 and 1996 Censuses and National Economics (1998) predicted negative growth rates for employment in the region.

With the exception of vocational skills, the Highbury region was below the national average in achieved skill levels for 1996. The rate of growth of skills is about the same as the national average and somewhat below the growth being experienced in most of the other study sites. Given the rate of population increase and the mix of emerging industries, it could be anticipated that there will be a skills deficit in the region in coming years, particularly in the areas of tourism and hospitality and eco-business.

Current participation in TAFE and universities is well below the rates for the State and the nation. Given that population growth is increasing at a rate almost equal to that of the nation, these participation levels are unlikely to adequately meet the requirements of increasing demand in some of the emerging industries outlined above. Public VET consists primarily of small TAFE campuses, and to a lesser extent ACE extension and outreach centres coordinated from outside of the region. The resident community is so small and the industries so dispersed and diverse as to make on-site TAFE provision and players in that provision limited. Much education and training for adults is done on the job, outside of the site or is bought in. The advent of VET competition policy has resulted in a growth in the range of providers but little growth in programs.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS:

A Changes and context

1 What are the changes in regional Australia over approximately the last five years in terms of:
- Industry profiles
- Employment demands — existing and emerging
- Skills profiles
- Levels of participation in education and training?

2 What are the key factors driving these changes (global, national, regional and local)?

B Configurations

3 What are the different configurations of VET provision occurring and how do they relate to these changes?

ISSUES:

Structure and procedures, small size of community

Continuity: '...if I get run over by a bus'

A degree of continuity of human, physical and social resources leads to greater cost-effectiveness. Continuity of these resources also has high productivity benefits that are sustainable over time. The loss of time and resources from the chopping and changing of program funding from one year to the next impedes VET stakeholders' responses to dealing with change effectively. This 'reinventing the wheel' takes its toll not only on the raw materials needed for the wheel to turn, but also on the skills and patience of the manufacturers. Equally, staff and marketing networks used by the wheel's manufacturers become unprofitable and incapable of responding to change effectively.

The story of VET in Highbury is one that throws a spotlight on Research Questions 1, 2 and 3 which concern the nature of changes in such areas as industry profiles, employment demands, skills profiles and levels of participation. Factors driving these changes are also illustrated, as well as the kinds of VET configurations and their relationship to the changes.

This case study describes how Highbury has struggled to respond to massive socio-cultural changes and decline of wealth and employment in a fragmented way. Large factions in the community lack a shared sense of direction and purpose. Trust and collaboration at the time of the initial interviews in 1999 was at a low ebb, particularly with governments. This lack of trust in VET is reported to be exacerbated by competition associated with the setting up of local agencies of a private labour market assistance provider. Conversely, the most effective collaboration was that engendered by the community-based network of Adult and Community Education (ACE).

A downturn in community fortunes

Highbury and its associated outlying communities has been adversely affected by a series of major changes in the last 20–30 years. The pressures of globalisation, local government restructure, decline in the timber industry associated with the regional forest agreement and restructuring of the dairy industry, along with rapid shifts in labour needs and markets have led to a range of difficulties for individuals and communities across the site. The complexity of this community, which has a large number of separate factions and conflicts running parallel with and against each other, is an important aspect of many sites in rural Australia. Rurality is not synonymous with simplicity or harmony. Indeed the small scale of many country communities magnifies and openly reveals the existing conflicts.

These tensions as to who or what is responsible for Highbury and the region's decline colour greatly the different responses to the widespread decline of vocational and VET opportunities in Highbury in particular. Many see working together to value add to the wood resource and the tourist resources as a solution to employment and the decline of the town. Others see collaborating locally to 'clamp down' on the welfare dependence and interference of 'outsiders' as the solution. Those who blame loss of industry and services to Highbury C organisations and businesses and State government policies see collaborating to improve local amenities, services and attractions as a solution.

There was evidence from the 1999 interviews that the historic, collaborative links between community learning organisations, including VET organisations, had become recently strained. There was evidence in 2000 of increased optimism, with an Independent local Member of State Parliament and State and Federal governments who appeared to be listening and responding to rural and remote regions.

Despite some similar problems and ongoing doubts in the timber industry, Highbury A has been small enough to unite around a number of community-based initiatives and community organisations and was well placed strategically on the highway to 'move on'. By contrast, Highbury B had a sense of being a 'new' town with new (though limited) opportunities and learning communities. These differences and similarities between towns are embodied in the different configurations of public VET (TAFE, ACE and the Health Complex) and the associated community collaboration.

Divisions in the community are not entirely clear cut with environmental issues providing shifting faultlines. Eco-business ventures exemplify fuzzy boundaries between traditional rural conservatives and socially progressive groups.

It is often argued by economists that rural decline is inevitable in the context of structural adjustment, but cases from other sites such as Billabong have shown this not to be necessary. What is missing in Highbury is a common or shared vision as to how to facilitate the learning required for this adjustment. While there are examples of positive development through vocational learning in Highbury they are isolated and often unsupported.

VET in Highbury

Most enterprises in the Highbury site are small. Much work is casual, seasonal and relatively unskilled. With a relatively small population in the area, few private providers and no substantial TAFE presence in the site (there are small TAFE branch campuses at Highbury and Highbury B), the capacity of VET to be effective remains limited. Ten of the 25 organisational representatives interviewed in 2000 said, unprompted, that the small community size was the reason for less effective training arrangements.

ACE providers are effective sites of adult and vocational learning at the local community level, particularly for individuals who require retraining as a consequence of industry restructuring. Other and more specialised training needs tend to be met by providers travelling into the site to deliver, or people going out of the site to Highbury C or of the state's capital city.

Despite considerable school-industry partnerships the effectiveness of VET in schools to attract young people to the dominant industries (forestry and agriculture) is limited by the low level of interest among young people for such local jobs and the small number of new jobs available. Most young people leave the area post-school to study (university or TAFE) or to work. However, there were some contra-indications from the 2000 organisation representative interviewees, who suggested that young people's VET needs were being relatively well met in the Highbury site. This may be because respondents expect that more academically inclined students will leave the area, and local VET is only expected to cater for the less academically inclined young people.

The main, public VET presence within the Highbury site consists of small TAFE campuses and outreach centres. VET provision generally is limited in its range and reach and involves small, independent and relatively unconnected providers including ACE and community-based learning organisations. A number of community organisations are deliberately and successfully targeting VET for particular groups such as women, older people and people with low literacy.

Most vocational learning in the Highbury site is non-formal or informal. Much of the formal learning is through community organisations, or delivered on the job. VET generally and TAFE particularly in this site is truly outreach. Because of isolation in a small market, few programs can be developed on site in response to local industry or community need. The market for private VET providers is tight because of the low population base, and few can operate in the site or compete with TAFE, even on a 'fly-in-fly out' basis. There is clear evidence that the 'new' workplace-based apprenticeship and traineeships are being misused in that people are being placed and employed but not necessarily effectively supported or trained. Schools in this region appear remote from local vocational learning, though collaboratively involved in small VET in school programs. Indigenous VET is limited to one site in Highbury, where CDEP is available. ACE has a strong presence in working with communities, particularly for older people and disadvantaged groups.

TAFE retains a site presence but relatively few programs, collaborative local connections or expertise. This contrasts with the strength and effectiveness of ACE providers in all three sites. Collaboration between health related learning networks is a feature of this site. The few industries and from larger business in the area do most of their training in-house, recruit already trained workers outside the area or send them off site, mainly to the state's capital city.

Recent VET changes

A number of organisations and employers reported in the 2000 interviews that an increase in training was due to a belief that the outcomes of training would be beneficial to the enterprise or organisation members in the shorter or longer term. The need to increase the skill level of employees was another frequently cited reason for changes to training in this site. This is consistent with the fact that traditional industries in the area (forestry, farming and some fishing) are undergoing restructure. There was a particularly positive perception across the site that partnerships in the community had brought people together since 1999 to manage change in the wake of the 1999 State election. That election returned a local Independent member holding the balance of power. The small number of other changes that were reported occurred as a consequence of community need, expressed primarily through community organisations. Continuity of collaborative arrangements are necessary to developing successful VET outcomes or these outcomes and their impact on national frameworks will be lessened.

Summary of changes to VET since 1999

In 1999 a range of VET provision existed within the Highbury site as summarised in a previous report. In discussing changes to VET since 1999 it is important to stress that provision varies across the Highbury site. Features of VET in the site include:

- Most community groups interviewed in Highbury identified links with training providers and other organisations. Public training providers and community organisations identified many more linkages used in planning and delivering training than did other types of groups;

- Most formal VET provision (TAFE, training programs, VET in schools) in the region continues to be by organisations outside of the area, particularly from Highbury C. Private providers find it difficult to effectively compete on price with TAFE in the limited market for training. There were minor additions to the range of formal VET available in Highbury, for example a childcare course was delivered by a local provider. Opportunities for formal VET in the smaller communities in the easternmost part of the Highbury site are limited;

- A perception that the more isolated towns (Highbury B and Highbury A) had, with strong community leadership created their own models of VET learning at a community level. Providers included a number of informal, stable, community-based learning organisations and an ACE provider. Collaborations between community-based providers and local organisations continued to grow in 2000;

- Collaboration continued to grow between the Highbury VET-in-schools initiative, local government and a group training company. TAFE, on the other hand, exhibited little evidence of collaborative activity

- Learning through agricultural extension networks in keeps farmers (particularly dairy and vegetable farmers) competitive;

- Four of the 25 organisations interviewed in 2000 reported an increase in online delivery of VET since 1999, and two (including one of the four), reported an increase in other electronic delivery methods.

Collaboration

The effectiveness and success of collaborations depends on continuity of resources, personnel and networks, with trust embedded in the interconnections.

However the extent and nature of VET participation and collaborative partnerships in the Highbury site is limited. These limitations are closely associated with the position of the three towns examined (Highbury, Highbury A and Highbury B) being isolated and not near main highways. All three communities shared a perception of relative isolation within their state and of an ongoing, long-term decline in opportunities for education, training and employment.

The widespread local perception is that public TAFE facilities in the Highbury site function, as they are called, as 'outreach' centres, receiving only what is handed out from the centralised TAFEs to the west. The impetus for previous collaboration which led to the setting up and networking of local community 'telecentres' within the site had largely evaporated with the growth of the Internet and local call ISP access.

ACE provides an important part of adult education provision in all communities. It is tightly connected and networked in all three towns via community organisations and the local community health complexes. The model of collaborative, community-based ACE provision in the Highbury site is a positive and effective one. A Neighbourhood House, in collaboration with many local organisations, provides a variety of non-accredited ACE courses in arts and crafts. The University of the Third Age, based in Highbury B, has reduced costs by encouraging their own members to research topics and present findings instead of hiring tutors or experts. This restructure is viewed as quality learning which has the added benefit of boosting the self esteem of the group members involved.

Successful external collaborations in this site are rare. Given the prevailing levels of distrust in the community, the most likely successful local collaborations would be those which operate internally and bridge across existing groups (such as those in ACE and the health providers, and to some extent through TAFE). Collaborative effort in VET was hindered by competition associated with the setting up of local agencies of a private labour market assistance provider. There is collaboration between the commercially motivated labour market provider agencies. There are few trusted links outside of the region.

Leadership

The Highbury site reveals considerable barriers to effective collaboration. It is difficult in a divided community to find someone or some organisation that has the capacity to lead in regional areas. This is particularly so in rural areas faced by community division, rural economic and population decline and isolation. There was a widespread perception amongst interviewees that local leadership in Highbury was decimated by the previous government's policy of amalgamating local municipalities. The Council, previously providing local leadership and employing 20 people, was reduced to a sub-agency dealing only with administrative matters such as rates and employing only three people. Further, due to their small population, no councillors from Highbury were elected to the larger amalgamated council based in Highbury C. In addition, the Highbury site appears to be a community split between mainly the rural conservative business, farming and timber communities and socially progressive, environmental and Indigenous activists, communities and organisations.

All of these issues are enormous challenges to local collaborative leadership initiatives. There are numerous examples of organisations doing their own thing but there has been no successful collective response to what is widely recognised as a crisis in terms of both the economy and identity.

Interestingly, the remote sites of Highbury A and Highbury B show more successful attempts at collaborative leadership than does the larger town of Highbury, which is consistent with the Bellbird site finding that outlying communities had stronger trust and cohesion. The Highbury A Municipality Council-owned Outreach Centre houses a combination of Neighbourhood House, ACE provider and the TAFE regional annexe. This Centre is an example of the collective collaboration necessary to address the community's learning needs, including some vocational needs. There is a strong sense, at least for some in this organisation, for everyone in the community to put their 'shoulder to the wheel' to make the most of their situation. They also take a formal approach to collaborative leadership in writing formal protocols of agreement between partners, so that clear agreement rather than personalities form the basis of partnerships:

> A formal protocol is just a written statement of the fact that we get along. That is, we share information, where we can we share, we offer each other our meeting facilities and computer facilities and that sort of thing. If we've got something to say to each other, we do it by telephone for a start to arrange an appointment. We've just got these sorts of things — steps that we take when we communicate with each other.
>
> Well it basically came about because the state's Human Services asked the question, 'Do you communicate with other organisations?' and I said, 'Yes'. And they said, 'Well do you have any written protocol?' and I thought 'Well, why not?' So basically it's just two pieces of paper. One's with their letterhead, one's with ours. The wording is exactly the same and we sign it. We both sign it. One of the reasons we do it actually on paper is that…if I get run over by a bus — I'm not going to be here for ever — the next person who comes into this job would be able to say, 'What's this protocol?' and have a look and say 'Ah, right'. So they don't have to reinvent them, all they have to do is to have a look.

Some small, local Indigenous communities appear excluded from, or unwilling to participate in, community collaborative efforts. The sense of marginalisation indicated in some of the interviews is profound and hints at the possible enormous differences in perspective and lived realities of the mainstream versus Indigenous communities, as indicated by this Indigenous respondent:

> And then you've got your little, you know, interest groups and it's political, like national party groups, your farmers groups…that essentially also represent themselves in the church groups and other groups in town. It's not what it looks like, you know…What I'm saying is that there are surface groups; there are groups that are seen to be representing the whole community but they're not, they're just fragments of personal interest groups.

Indigenous opinion, as for mainstream opinion, is not homogenous, with the [tribal name] Aboriginal Council in Highbury being one of the most dynamic and collaborative organisations of any (Indigenous or otherwise) within the area. There are reported divisions and mistrust between Indigenous groups, such that one group's 'leadership initiatives' (Highbury, [tribal name]) is seen as attempts at control by other groups (Highbury A).

Highbury B provides examples of collaborative leadership but in the context of the divisions apparent in Highbury. At one level is the business community collaborating to develop the town according to their business interests. At a more grassroots level are the 'Friends of Highbury B' who are very environmentally concerned, and also appear to resent outside business interests coming in to exploit 'their' quiet community assets of nature and beauty. A third perspective, that of the TAFE Outreach Centre coordinator, sees the development and influx of outsiders as bringing vibrancy, jobs and hope to the community by utilising the area's natural assets to provide a 'living classroom for environmental studies'. This vision enables a bridge between opposing camps:

> OK, well, there are certain things we are working towards and we try to keep an eye on directions and have a vision or two for each outreach centre and I guess the main vision for Highbury B is more of a bent on environmental studies — because we live in an area of such natural beauty. We have world biosphere status. This region is used already as a benchmark to measure other regions by. So I think we can embark on more studies to make people aware of the natural environment, the ecology of the diversity of habitat systems we have in Highbury B. And to showcase Highbury B to use it as a living classroom. And the need to preserve nature as it is. But also because we have trends in tourism and arts events happening, I think there will be growth in those areas too. So we have to be very careful about how we marry the two caring for the natural environment. So the plan is for more nature-based studies to make visitors to the town aware of what we have got here and why they are visiting and how they need to preserve it. What measures they can take to make sure they don't damage it.

Vocational learning quality

While on one level developing into a 'lifestyle' area for outsiders and tourists, the Highbury site is in economic decline evidenced by population (particularly youth) decrease, a wind-back in State government services and a reduction in business and employment opportunities. All this has impacted on the quality of education and training available in the area. With a reduction in funding and therefore courses offered, there has been a decline in school retention rates with many students leaving the area for further training and employment. A representative of the TAFE outreach centre at Highbury said the introduction of online teaching has increased the need for high literacy skills. However, literacy levels in the Highbury area are lower than the State average. The need for resources such as personal computers was also cited as a barrier to online delivery success. One private training provider claimed that community learners were disillusioned with the quality and value of certificates gained from TAFE and demanded more quality assurance before enrolling. There was also a perceived lack of computer training in the Highbury area.

There is no evidence in the Highbury site that online delivery is a realistic, desirable or practical delivery option for most learners. For many learners not in work or in tenuous work, face-to-face learning is not only practical and effective, it positively connects learners to other community members and to its services and support networks.

Discussion

What promotes collaboration in VET?

Competition policy in the Highbury site, as applied in small, thin markets in a declining area, has had the effect of decreasing trust between remaining VET providers and increasing the incentives for VET providers to establish their own, independent markets or alternatively to leave the area. Collaboration in VET becomes less likely, as in Highbury, in a context of elevated internal and external mistrust.

And yet collaboration is not an answer or end in itself. In some cases it is born of necessity. The VET-in-schools initiative, for example, was only possible in collaborative mode because of the small size of senior school enrolments in the Highbury, Highbury A and Highbury B communities. Despite extensive consultation and collaboration with local industry the initiative was always going to struggle in rural schools where the primary choice is between the chance of a poorly paid local job or a tertiary entrance score sufficient to get out of town.

In other cases, as in Highbury B and Highbury A, collaboration is both initiated and driven by small community size and isolation. Where collaboration is less likely to work is in larger, divided communities like Highbury where individuals and organisations have a distrust of outside influences as well organisations embedded in their own communities.

Collaboration is also less likely to arise and be less successful if initiated where the traditional self-image of a town like Highbury, in this case its identity as a self-sustaining timber town, is seen to be at risk as a consequence of a range of outsiders and outside factors: in particular tourism, environmentalism, economic rationalism, rationalisation of government services and globalisation. Any local person or organisation that supports or collaborates to bring about change on any of these platforms is seen as being somewhat 'heretical'.

What are the constraints on VET?

VET is constrained in the Highbury site by the small and declining nature of the three communities as well as by geography. The linear, one-dimensional nature of regional communities, sandwiched as they are between the sea on the south and mountains to the north combined with increasing isolation as one travels eastwards, exacerbates the sense and reality of increasing isolation from services and other towns. Unlike in many Australian communities, there are few opportunities for lateral, collaborative links to other larger town or regions. For young people of post-school age, there are considerable disincentives for staying to work or to work and be trained locally and many incentives to leave for larger towns and cities. Even the local VET-in-schools initiatives, carefully designed to mesh with the needs of local primary industries, have been unable to attract sustainable numbers of local young people.

Any future links would need to respect the independence, autonomy and needs of the local community. Those which work against success are those which are internal, exclusive or competitive and which restrict involvement by other community organisations.

With limited formal VET opportunities, most adult and vocational learning occurs informally outside of TAFE . Much adult and vocational learning occurs through community organisations and service providers such as the Neighbourhood House and the University of Third Age. Many of the current changes associated with industry restructure, with the exception of tourism and value adding to existing primary industries, diminish rather than increase vocational opportunities and VET opportunities within the site.

Conclusion

Continuity of human, physical and social infrastructure becomes a crucial factor in helping communities meet VET needs — circumstances such as these.

Without a strong or dominant TAFE presence in the area, most training in the Highbury site is done on the job or off site. The recent introduction of privatised labour market assistance has created new forms of competition in these small communities which are not necessarily economically rational or desirable in terms of their impact on overall VET opportunities or in terms of their diminution of community trust. With an ageing adult population, there are indications of an increasing emphasis on adult learning through ACE providers and community-based health and aged care providers.

The Highbury site, like Rivertown, illustrates some limitations of isolated towns and regions with small population size adapting to externally driven change. There were strong indications, in Highbury in particular, that a traditionally secure and coherent rural community had been driven to breaking point and fractured by successive waves of external change and loss; of local government, industry and employment opportunities in particular. These changes had also impacted on VET by breaking external understandings and trust and reducing existing collaboration.

9

LEATHERWOOD: Partnerships produce VET outcomes

... we've got a formal link ... which links council with the business and institutional community in the city. We have established partnerships. We have two focuses of our strategic plan: one to build partnerships and strategic alliances within the city. The other, to build partnerships and strategic alliances within our region.

City Council economic development marketing manager

SITE SNAPSHOT

The site includes Leatherwood City, Leatherwood A, Leatherwood B, and Leatherwood C City. Leatherwood C City is included due to its importance for Leatherwood B in terms of VET provision. Leatherwood B depends on Leatherwood C for most of its service provisions. The population of the region is on the increase. Leatherwood is a major service centre as well as a focal point for strong manufacturing industries, education, health and community services which form the major bases for employment. While Leatherwood has higher levels of employment and lower levels of unemployment than the rest of its urban area, its people face higher levels of disadvantage when compared with areas closer to the state's capital city CBD. Difficulties of transport access to the central city; rapidly expanding suburbs, and the pressure to provide community services and infrastructure are important issues for the community. Many residents commute to the state's capital city for work.

The wider Leatherwood A area has experienced a continuing population increase over the past 15 years. Retail, health, community services and education are the largest employment industries. The tourism and hospitality industry is another significant employer in the area. The population base of Leatherwood A is made up of a diverse group of people such as artists, poets, those seeking an alternative lifestyle, Indigenous inhabitants, and migrants.

Leatherwood B is situated approximately 160km from the state's capital city. The town is experiencing a withdrawal of services by all levels of government and private enterprise. Lack of regular public transport plagues the residents making access to Leatherwood C, their closest services provider, difficult. The main sources of employment are the power station and local collieries.

Leatherwood's skill levels exceed the Australian average with a skill mix which is particularly strong at the vocational end of the skills spectrum. Participation at TAFE in 1996 was strongest in Leatherwood, compared with other sites. This strong participation is a reflection of the strength of vocational skills at the site.

Leatherwood has well-established VET providers like TAFE, VET in schools, private and community providers, adult and community education. It also has a university and a large teaching hospital. The handful of training providers in Leatherwood A are not interconnected. The International Hotel Management School, the TAFE and the Day and Evening College are a few among the training providers. Residents are often reliant on services such as universities and specialist medical services located in and around the state's capital city. Access to such services can be costly and difficult due to limited public transport. Apart from on-the-job training in the mines, Leatherwood B lacks any coordinated form of formal or nonformal VET provision within the community, not even having a secondary school in town.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS:

B ***Configurations***

4 How and why did the different configurations of VET provision emerge?

5 How do the different configurations of VET provision meet the changing needs of stakeholders?

C ***Effectiveness***

6 How effective are the different configurations of VET provision in meeting the needs of the stakeholders?

ISSUES:

Collaboration.

A strong and developing region

Across the whole site, employment in several occupations grew significantly in the ten year period to 1996. Of particular note is the employment growth of managers, which grew at a rate faster than any other site. Other occupations with strong employment growth included professionals, associate professionals and intermediate clerical sales and service workers. These figures are consistent with strong growth across a range of industries. Participation at TAFE in 1996 is strongest in Leatherwood, compared with other sites. TAFE attendance is also above the national average. The strong participation in TAFE reflects the strength of vocational skills at the site.

Because of the strong and relevant skills profile and the strength of the collaborative partnerships in the community-based VET area at the main site, this site goes a considerable way towards addressing Research Questions 4 and 5 related to the reasons for the emergence of different configurations of VET, and the way these configurations meet the needs of those involved. It also throws light on Research Question 6, relating to the nature of effectiveness of differing VET configurations. This aspect – the nature and impact of collaborations of configurations - will form the particular focus for this case study.

Local collaboration helps VET outcomes

As noted, this case study explores whether there is a relationship between local collaboration and VET outcomes. The main centre in the Leatherwood site has a strong economic, skills and employment profile. It also has a strong and active community-based collaborative VET structure. A notable feature of this site is the strong evidence of networking and building of relationships between organisations in Leatherwood itself. Here, industry and enterprise-related groups work in partnership towards the common purpose of ensuring adequate and appropriate skills supplies are available for the district. Amongst VET providers strong relationships have developed but relationships appear to be increasingly limited and bounded by fears that collaborating with the competition will lose market share. This fear is particularly evident between TAFE and schools, as this school representative explains.

> About 1995 we had large numbers, but these VET framework courses weren't in then so since they've come in the TAFE numbers have gone off. Also, we had to count kids that went to TAFE [and it] affected our staffing, so Principals weren't as keen to let kids go off to TAFE.

Businesses have traditionally faced these competitive constraints on the will to collaborate, hence the formation of industry and enterprise-related groups such as Chambers of Commerce that provide a mechanism for competitors to collaborate to address issues that affect them all. Competitive fears are not an issue amongst community-based VET groups and government agencies. These groups have built strong collaborative relationships through networking. Some notable examples of the relationships these VET providers have established are described below.

Example 1: Driving the VET dollar further

There is a well-established sense of 'community' in Leatherwood A. Community groups such as the Neighbourhood Centre and environment groups have built an effective sense of community through deliberately establishing networks and creating relationships with other groups through these networks. In the Neighbourhood Centre and in environment groups, these networks were strongly enough established for their expertise to be sought out by others. In one instance, a school approached the environment group to assist with a Landcare project and to work with students. The environment group was notable for the way it deliberately seeks links with other groups by attending and/or participating in their activities. This inter-linking means that everyone within the area knows each other. This strengthens networks, relationships and the success of their work. It also reduces costly duplication of resources, and stretches the dollar further.

Example 2: Enhancing national VET pathways

A community-based VET provider, a new IT Centre in Leatherwood C, was established as a result of a community consultation process, arising from a skills audit, and a community SWOT analysis carried out by a nearby university. This process and the decision to establish strong links with local businesses, TAFE, community college, employment service, community groups, government agencies and council embedded this fledgling organisation in the community with strong support. This community consultation and collaboration around VET provision has provided VET that furthers relevant accreditation pathways for a wide range of individuals and organisations in the community. One participant explained it as follows:

> We've got Leatherwood C TAFE, we've got the Regional Community College and Leatherwood C Employment Service which is a part of a regional area training provider. We're also heavily involved with other community groups and both the government and private businesses, for instance the business enterprise center through our sponsorship, and the council as well, the library and private enterprise…

Example 3: Benefits for VET of partnerships with governments

In Leatherwood itself, government institutions and agencies appeared to have well-established links with community groups, each other and schools, the TAFE, and universities. In most instances these links are necessary for effective delivery of services. The value placed on building such relationships at this site appears to be high. So, for example, local government in Leatherwood proactively promotes collaboration and partnerships within the community to ensure VET provision is adequate and relevant to local needs. In Leatherwood C local government sponsored the establishment of the IT Centre mentioned above. This does not hold true for all of the site as it was also apparent from some of the interviews in Leatherwood A that, unlike the other two city councils, the [specific name] Council tends not to encourage collaboration and networking.

Example 4: Partners know the benefits of collaboration

A number of schools had well-established links with TAFE, employment agencies, the Chamber of Commerce and local businesses in Leatherwood itself. These links were necessary to deliver their work studies program. However, those responsible for building these links were well aware of the additional value such links brought with them and were developing plans to extend and strengthen these links through social activities:

> We're intending next year to run a whole series of industry breakfasts with industry where we bring the teachers and industry representatives together so that you have that cross fertilisation of ideas and you can work out you know best practice and all that sort of thing.

Example 5: Local government a key VET player

In Leatherwood, the local council actively encouraged collaboration and networking. Their aim, as explained in the following quotation, is to build Leatherwood as a learning economy:

> There's a big focus of our actual strategic plan both internally and within our own region so we have two focuses, one to build partnerships and strategic alliances within the city, two to build partnerships and strategic alliances within our region. ... In terms of alliances I mean with things like departments State and regional, Australian business, the regional chambers of commerce, internally the chambers of commerce and the university, TAFE, in the industrial development committee, they are the types of things, we've been trying to do. As we've done such a good job of building it in terms of our economic profile we're trying to take that model and place it over the social and environmental sectors as well. So whilst there's a lot of loose alliances we're trying to tighten those up in those areas. ... One of our aims for Leatherwood, one of our strategic goals is to build Leatherwood as a learning economy more so than a learning city. To build all of those alliances that go within the traditional learning city structure but build those even deeper into training to business so that whilst you build all the alliances within all the training and education facilities and therefore because it's involved high schools and that you're starting to develop this lifelong learning concept, you want to get that down even stronger into the business community.

As this respondent explained, the council was 'way up there trying to pull them [those organisations mentioned above] together and get them to work together':

> ...yeah council supports us really well, they, the building that we are in now and when we go back is actually owned by council, and they support us really well, they do our book keeping for us, like on an unpaid basis...

Other local government councils are reported to have gone through phases of involvement, as this community organisation representative from Leatherwood A describes:

> I: How helpful is the Council ... [in] meeting needs of the community?
>
> R: Oh, that's a good question, it's a bit hard to answer. They do different things in different ways but actually have cut back quite a lot over the last few years... I suppose for a while there was no community development focus from Council, and then in the 80's there was quite a move to have more of a community development focus and people within Council were appointed to positions, they literally worked directly with the community...then all of that was sort of pulled back and as the community sector itself got bigger, they ended up taking on a lot of the responsibilities of what Council did, so I think Council have become much more economic rationalists...and certainly it's not as progressive as what I see other Councils being, in that they accept the level of responsibility, around community development...

These comments from interviewees show that local government can be a key player in facilitating the provision of relevant VET outcomes. Councils act most beneficially when they bring different groups within the community together to define needs, to develop solutions through collaboration, and, if necessary, to initiate collaborative mechanisms or institutions to provide the required VET.

Discussion

There are some useful messages from this site for improving VET provision and its outcomes that are not reported in the extracts above. Provision of safe public transport at times that fit with VET learners' needs would allow access to a wide variety of already operating VET programs for people living in remote locations. These interviews emphasise the need for training providers to negotiate with clients to ensure that VET is tailored to local industry requirements and is in touch with current practices. However, the more complex messages for improving VET provision emerging from this case study are about collaboration.

How does local collaboration build benefits?

The simple answer is that collaboration results in benefits by building a history of good service and practice, linked to a strongly established set of relevant and purposeful networks. An example of this is when a Leatherwood A school approached the local environment group to assist with a Landcare project and to work with students. The environment group's policy of involvement in other groups means that networks are strengthened. Active, inter-linked networks act as a spring board to collaboration. Similar goals and visions, as in the collaboration between Leatherwood City Council, the local Chamber of Commerce and local industries, also stand out as being important for successful VET outcomes. Access to resources, such as a building or meeting area, appeared to be important in assisting and providing opportunities for collaboration, especially for community groups and providers.

In short, collaboration appears to be a necessity for achieving effective outcomes in Leatherwood. Extensive networking between varied activity groups always preceded collaboration between groups. Each group (community groups, schools, government agencies and so on) had its own networks, then would link to others and become part of other networks, so that the links created were diverse, bringing with them a wide range of information, knowledge and potential for learning. These extensive 'weak ties' (Granovetter 1973) were then the basis for developing 'strong ties' or deeper relationships that were mutually beneficial. These relationships were most strongly established in community groups, perhaps because this is a part of their way of working, or their paradigm.

Collaboration through its networks and trust, also reduces transaction costs to business and enterprises. One provider discussed the benefits of collaborative trust to local communities by describing 'cooperativition', a term meaning simultaneous competition and cooperation:

> A way of encouraging students to stay in the area, once qualified, is really to try and get the regional areas to cooperate much more in terms of the provision of career opportunities. What tends to happen in most regional areas is that regional providers ... no matter ... what business they're in, tend to compete with each other. And there's a wonderful academic word called cooperativition which was actually coined by an American which means you cooperated and compete ... for example, if you were in the legal profession, instead of competing against each other for staff, you collectively cooperate for staff, but then you recognise that you try and share ... if ... somebody is looking for a career development opportunity, instead of them having to go to a capital city or wherever, then they may be able to find the career development opportunity within the regional area... That's done through establishing much better employment networks and cooperative networks within the regional areas. It can be done.

Some principal features of linkages and collaborative arrangements that can be distilled from the Leatherwood data include:

- often the nature of the work required extensive networking and the formation of collaborative arrangements. For example, to deliver a service for youth, a government agency required good networks with other government agencies, with neighbourhood centres, and perhaps the TAFE;

- differences in the extent and nature of collaborative arrangements were evident depending on the identity and role of these organisations. For example, community organisations have extensive networks and collaborative arrangements. This was particularly the case with one community VET provider as a result of consultation with all stakeholders from its inception. Government agencies providing community services are well linked, as is the case in other sites. A local council, with access to resources, played an important leadership role in promoting and developing collaborative arrangements for the effective delivery of VET. This was not the case with all local councils in this site.

- extensive networking between varied activity groups always preceded collaboration between groups. This resulted in dense and diverse networks and access to a wide range of knowledge and learning. Involving stakeholders from the beginning stages of developing a service to meet local needs ensures the strength and commitment of and to the networks, collaboration and service;

- those actively involved in establishing collaborative arrangements brought with them a high degree of appreciation and knowledge of the benefits of these arrangements;

- community consultation processes, the establishment of strong links with local businesses, TAFE, community college, employment service, community groups, government agencies and council, and collaboration with external agencies for mutual benefit, produce relevant VET outcomes enjoying strong community support. The result is a sustainable outcome for VET.

The effectiveness of VET in this region has been enhanced by the extent and trusting nature of collaboration and linkages between VET community-based providers and government agencies as demonstrated in the city of Leatherwood. Although there may be competition for funding between these groups, they do not appear to have the same fear of competition as local businesses and providers. Competition appears to limit opportunities for provision and collaborative arrangements between businesses and providers.

Conclusion

The examples in this case study show how the configurations of VET partnerships impact positively on the effectiveness of the VET in meeting the needs of stakeholders. The enterprise and industry-based partnerships in Leatherwood offer guidance about the power of collaboration in producing and enhancing many aspects of VET for its clients. This is evident from the data in the case of enhancing vocational learning pathways. It is also evident in the examples of cooperative trust, or 'cooperativition', where collaboration helps with employment outcomes through planning relevant skill acquisition. There is also some evidence to suggest that enhanced local VET outcomes impact positively on the outcome measures of national frameworks, as in the examples of improved accreditation.

From the Leatherwood case, there is evidence that local partnerships can enhance many VET outcomes in terms of pathways, relevant skills, resource sharing and national frameworks. VET outcomes may be enhanced *through* collaborations, but this needs further testing on a wider scale through well-evaluated similar initiatives. The evidence should encourage those who are contemplating strengthening their collaborative bases to proceed strategically. For those already operating in these ways, these examples should provide some valuable clues for refining further collaborative activity towards strategic goals. Many indicators of sound collaborative ties are evident, particularly from the main site at Leatherwood. It is shown by representatives from each provider speaking highly of the others. Sound collaborative ties are shown through the creation of articulated pathways between various providers, and in the shared vision for collaborative VET expressed by a range of respondents who are collaborating agents. However, mistrust and fear amongst providers and businesses result in a degree of inefficient competition for students and funds. In contrast, community-based groups and some government agencies appear not to share this mistrust and fear of collaborating with the competition and it is these latter groups that have built strong collaborative relationships through networking. Interestingly, providers and businesses are members of these networks, but not initiators or drivers of the network.

Another finding stems from previous ANTA research and is confirmed here. It is that collaborations may have short or long-term objectives. A blend appears to produce the best outcomes. Collaborations based solely on short-term goals may lack the time required to engender interpersonal and interorganisational trust. Lack of trust will impede collaborative outcomes, and may well result in a negative capacity for longer-term strategic collaborations. Trust-based long-term goals without due attention to short-term outcomes are not sustainable in the present competitive marketplace. Partnerships produce better VET outcomes when they are characterised by trusting collaborations across sectors and groups, but with similar goals and purposes.

There is a postscript to this case study, and it concerns the outlying town of Leatherwood B where VET provision is almost non-existent. The emphasis in this report has been on the region as a whole, and on Leatherwood and Leatherwood A in particular. These are larger centres, growing and with a synergy possible from a critical mass. The message is a simple and often repeated one in rural Australia – every region is different, and in policy terms, one hat does not fit all. The way to enhance VET and its outcomes in smaller towns and centres is found in other case studies, not this one, and the solutions are not likely to be the same in any two cases, although the processes of achieving strong and sustainable outcomes are the same, as summarised in the final chapter.

10

POSSUM POINT: Endorsing and resourcing enabling leadership

We've also established an extremely good structure within the community here [for] our youth...recreation and youth facilities... Unfortunately we just can't fund a leader to be able to do it.

Chief Executive Officer of an Aboriginal Community Council

SITE SNAPSHOT

The Possum Point site includes the town of Possum Point (population 11 678), Possum Point A (population 1151) 50km north of Possum Point, Possum Point B (population 396) to the west of Possum Point and Possum Point C some 600km north west of the main centre. The region is notable for its fishing industry, agriculture (mainly wheat, sheep) and tourism. Most industries are in decline, there is a low population growth rate and a loss of youth to the region. An ageing population has led to significant increases in community and health services. However, respondents' perceptions were that Possum Point was experiencing growth as evidenced in the increase in aquaculture and building activity. The increased activity in aquaculture included farming and manufacturing with talk of a considerable international investment. In fact the aquaculture industry is now worth $80 million annually. There are a number of developing agricultural industries including viticulture, olive production and native food production, canola oil, Boer goats and emu farming. The perception of the downtum in agricultural activity was supported with stories of small farms being bought out and poor returns on crops.

Respondents expressed concern about the changes in Commonwealth government funding and its impact on service provision for the unemployed. Unemployment in 1996 at the Possum Point site was above the national average and higher than most of the other study sites in this report. Recent evidence from interviews is more optimistic, with aquaculture set to replace some of the employment losses of the traditional basis of employment (agriculture), and prospects for growth in health and community services. Possum Point A was experiencing some growth, with reports of a marina being built. Possum Point C was showing signs of optimism due to the interest in mining nearby which would assist with employment and related activity. Currently, Possum Point C experiences high unemployment.

Possum Point has the highest proportion of people with basic vocational skills among the study sites and a below-average mix of tertiary qualifications. Participation in TAFE in 1996 was relatively high compared to other study sites Education provision at the Possum Point site is serviced by a TAFE college, a high school, primary schools and a number of kindergartens. Other VET providers in the region include an environmental science centre and and Indigenous study centre. The environmental science centre and the TAFE have established a VET-in-schools program, with fishing offering the major pathway. The TAFE campus manager claims that the Institute has become the State leader in flexible delivery.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS:

B ***Configurations***

3 What are the different configurations of VET provision occurring and how do they relate to these changes?

4 How and why did the different configurations of VET provision emerge?

5 How do the different configurations of VET provision meet the changing needs of stakeholders?

ISSUES:

Collaboration, structure and procedures of leadership.

Shift emphasis for resourcing VET?

Successes are not evenly spread across sites, and this holds true for Possum Point as well. However, Possum Point provides some interesting examples of the relationship between collaboration and meeting community VET needs, and the role of leadership in facilitating these. In many cases, what can be seen as a result of collaboration is the creation of jobs (paid and unpaid) and related training when there were none before. Collaboration appears to operate at various strata in the Possum Point community. This is often reflected in the nature of the leadership and the linkages leaders develop. As with collaborative arrangements anywhere, collaboration between one group may isolate or disempower another group.

Similarly, as the quotation, *we just can't fund a leader*, at the beginning of the case study suggests, enabling leadership that gets and keeps VET collaborations moving cannot be taken for granted. It needs resourcing and it needs a focus in the strategic local planning environment. As important, is the fact that enabling leadership for VET does not necessarily need to come from the VET providers. In fact, there is evidence that suggests that it is more effective in meeting community needs, and subsequently regional and national needs, when a cross-sectoral leadership model is identified and supported.

In the discussion section that follows, four examples of differing collaborative configurations are outlined. Each represents a fairly discrete 'stratum' of the community involved, and each illustrates Research Questions 3, 4 and 5. These are the questions about the types of different configurations and collaborations, their reasons for emergence, and how these different configurations meet changing and differing VET stakeholder needs.

Four vignettes

Vignette 1: Science Centre

The Possum Point Science Centre is a private training provider, established in Possum Point because of locals 'wanting to have things occurring in this town rather than it being sucked out to the city'. The Centre has strong collaborative arrangements with the Industry Training Advisory Board (ITAB), and in fact share the same building and the same Board members. Board members include those who have knowledge of a range of funding initiatives, such as an employee of the Regional Development Board. The Science Centre has established collaborative arrangements with a University, providing opportunities to undertake the Bachelor of Technology (Aquaculture); they also have links with the local fishing industry at a number of levels through relationships developed in the delivery of traineeships and with various industry bodies. The Centre collaborates with its main competitor, the TAFE college in the area.

The Centre appears to have been very successful in gaining market share and has developed a very good reputation. The establishment of the Centre set up direct competition with the local institute of TAFE. Competition between the Centre and TAFE is strong and elicits heated responses in discussion, with TAFE feeling that because of the close relationship between the ITAB and the Centre, that their share of the market is open to manipulation. Although there is collaboration between the two providers in the delivery of courses, the relationship is not an easy one and certainly does not display evidence of trust. This is an example of a common-purpose collaboration, where the focus is on meeting the needs of the task.

Leadership in the development instance is, however, at the highest level and appears similar to many rural towns where a relatively small group of mainly business people is represented on many boards and the local council. These people appear to be the well-connected power brokers in the area — the instigating leaders often referred to as 'the movers and shakers'.

The following quote illustrates the range of roles and responsibilities such 'mover and shaker' may have in a regional town. This person is now a private VET provider, and also serves on the Board of the TAFE:

> The organisations I am involved in. Well, I am on the Board of TAFE. I have been the President for five years, but I have just given that up. I am now the Treasurer which is still enough to do. I am on the Board of Career Employment Group which is a group training company based in [name of town]. But we act as their agent in Possum Point for some services. And then I belong to groups…All Skillshares have a network. There is the Regional Development Board and I am not on the Regional Development Board, but they have different sub-groups of the region, the Development Board ones, the Fishing Industry Target Team and I am on that. I try and keep a finger on what is happening in the fishing industry. And how training, particularly through TAFE, might relate to that. And then there is the Regional Development Association which I am a member of, but that is not terribly active in my view at the moment. So I don't go to too many evenings of that. There is quite a range of different things. And then sort of the youth activities. I am on the committee for Youth Services, I am on that. I am also on the Camp Convention Committee. Which is an arm of the City of Possum Point Council. So, yeah, it is enough to keep you interested.

This example of enabling leadership and intersecting networks shows the degree of commitment and breadth of spread in leadership and collaboration at this level of collaborative network. It is important to note here that this loosely-knit configuration of partners occupies the 'higher' level of power and prestige in the region, exercising considerable sway over resource allocations and staffing. It does, however, follow the principles established in the previous case study on Leatherwood , where strategic stakeholders with a common purpose are identified for maximum outcomes.

However, the cautionary note about this case is that it may be wise to pay greater attention to the networks at 'middle' and 'lower' stratums. While the needs of the fishing industry are met in this example, it is worthwhile noting that there has been considerable unrest about the environmental impacts of aquaculture in the region. This prompts the question, to what degree are stakeholders other than those directly involved in the industry represented to put forward different perspectives that the industry may need to consider for its long term sustainability. Trainees in this industry and other observers of the industry in the region, noted that trainees did not often gain long term employment as a result of undertaking the traineeships, that a new lot of trainees was employed each year, enabling the industry to access these government subsidies. Again, stakeholders representative of the student body appear to have very limited voice in this collaboration. The 'middle' and 'lower' stratums potentially have perspectives to offer which is where the longer-term sustainability of the initiative is most likely to be established and confirmed.

The next instance shows one of these apparently less powerful initiatives, and how it is beginning to impact on the wider community and its VET outcomes.

Vignette 2: Women's Tourist Information Group

This initiative demonstrates some of the characteristics required for enabling leadership in VET – namely, successful grassroots collaborative leadership that involves and disperses leadership. In one Possum Point case, doing a VET course empowered a group of young women to start a business of their own — a tourist information organisation. They initially met with considerable skepticism, even disinterest, from the local government authority. After running the organisation on a voluntary basis for the first 12 months in a tent, and demonstrating considerable demand for their service while continuing to seek support, they eventually gained funding. The quote below, from one of these respondents, tells their story:

> We ended up with 23 subjects in all, I think. Law and marketing and accounting and all sorts of things. We all had our own sort of bits that we liked out of it and we worked pretty well together as a team and out of that grew this business.
>
> ...we all entered for our own reasons, wide and varied, from boredom to looking for careers to all sorts of things. And the Council actually asked for a tender for a 7-day tourist office while we were still studying at TAFE, full time. So it actually went on for 12 months after that. While we were doing our other studies, we ended up volunteering, after asking them several times if we could, to prove the need for a business like this. When we volunteered we actually put a tent up on the foreshore every weekend and public holiday for 10 months to encounter people and we chased Optus until they sponsored us with a mobile phone so that we could have contact with all our operators and accommodation places. And finally after the end of that time we won the contract to operate and we formed a partnership. There were four of us, one girl has moved on. But there are three of us now. And we have gone on to employ a casual and a trainee as well. We have had two trainees. And both those trainees are now studying for open learning certificates in tourism.

Local businesses soon realised the value of such a service and assisted in the lobbying process to Council — bonding ties were developed. To successfully gain funding and establish their business, these women established extensive horizontal linkages within the tourist industry and vertical linkages with Council, the Chamber of Commerce, the regional Tourism Association, government departments and State tourism bodies. At this level there is also considerable networking, exchanging information and keeping each other up-to-date. The partners equally share decisions and workload, creating a positive working environment where their enthusiasm and knowledge and skills are passed onto their trainees. This is an example of enabling leadership, where decision making is shared, extensive horizontal and vertical plus bonding and bridging ties have been developed. This example also indicates the importance of dispersed decision making, and the building of extensive networks. In addition, it illustrates the importance for VET in building into its provision of training this type of knowledge and skill.

Vignette 3: Possum Point Community House

At another level are small community organisations aimed at helping Possum Point's marginalized communities — the poor, Indigenous, and migrant communities. This is an example of one such organisation. It is the Possum Point Community House (CH), established in response to a substantial degree of poverty and homelessness in Possum Point. There is a core of dedicated, hard working volunteers who are struggling to maintain and extend the services offered. These include a multitude of services from a cheap nourishing meal cooked by volunteers, assistance with accessing any number of services, courses, and general support. Activities are organised using a facilitative leadership style, where those participating build considerable skills and confidence.

> I guess we all picked up skills we didn't know we had, in our various roles on the committee, there's been quite a few little surprises. Just different ones taking on, like the secretary and that sort of thing, she's managing a lot better than she ever thought she would.

For some, participating in craft courses, has led to the next step of working with the Committee to produce enough to run a stall to raise funds. This is an example of participation in community organisations leading to increased skills and confidence.

The CH has networks with the local council, government services, TAFE, some of the local church groups and other community groups. They are currently attempting to gain the assistance of some of these groups in the provision of services. However, this is proving to be difficult. Although the Committee has good links with services and volunteer organisations, it does not seem to include representatives from the business community. As the quote below illustrates this is something of a closed stratum of the community for these people.

> Respondent 1:In Possum Point too, a lot of it is it's not what you know, but who you know. You know Uncle Fred might run something else and Cousin George might run something else and you've got more opportunity of getting in than if you were just an average person off the street. I find it easier to get work in the state's capital city than I ever do in Possum Point .
>
> Respondent 2: They're all friends
>
> Respondent 1: I don't have too many relatives that own businesses, actually I don't think I've got any that own businesses in Possum Point . Or run things in Possum Point .

Strong horizontal networking is evident in this example, but there are limited vertical linkages necessary to bring in support, credibility and funding. The CH does not have a paid coordinator and is run on an entirely voluntary basis. This adds to the problems in establishing networks, and credibility.

The difficulties of a town accepting change and issues of 'pride' or stigma at being seen visiting the CH and a community perception where 'they are fighting all the time' are blamed for the limited number of users of the CH.

> [Y]ou get people that get very proud that — they have got down that low, that they are too proud to come out and admit to people that they are needing help.

Other difficulties were also identified, including chasing funding trails. This group of enabling leaders dedicate considerable time and energy to the running of the CH, and are assisted in the development of skills and knowledge required to run such an organisation by the Possum Point Council, Community Development Officer. Although networks are established with government services and other community groups, there appears to be little networking with potential sources of funding, other than government — with its' difficult funding trails' — such as the business community. Likewise there was no evidence in the data of the business community and other economic power brokers having linkages with the CH. There is no paid position which may have been led to some of these issues being able to be addressed. The lack of a designated paid position and the lack of vertical networking raises the issue of sustainability of the CH and its important VET-enhancing strategies. Twelve months after this data was collected, the CH had folded.

Vignette 4: Possum Point A Grassroots Response to Crisis

Possum Point A provides an example of successful grassroots oriented leadership in a remote community. This community faced a crisis (rural decline) which led to a grassroots-community consultation forum and the appointment of a very successful community development officer.

> In 1991, the community held a meeting with 400 people, they closed all the churches on a Sunday, and they had a community planning session, to look at the problems that they were experiencing at that time, and several of those involved high interest rates in the 80s and the demise of farms, probably, and how the people had fallen on bad times and how did it affected business, maybe you'd better stop it there. Okay, so the, a meeting was held on a

> Sunday, with 400 people, and they developed some visions, perhaps for the community, of where it wanted us to go, and one of those things that came out of that, was to have somebody working for the community, full time, developing projects that the Council didn't have time to do, and also, focusing on how people can learn about information technology, so this is where this project was born really, back in '91, and it took five years to get that vision into place. There was a committee formed and they worked on various things, but along the way they applied for funding from the Telecentre Programming, Department of Primary Industry in Canberra, and they were successful in getting that funding of $70 000 in 1995. That was for a part-time person, and they also, the group, went to the Council and asked them to fund the other part of the project, and the Council put up $20 000, so for two years, they planned to employ, a Community Development Officer to fund community projects and to develop the Telecentre, and that's where I came along.

This Community Development Officer has the ability to enthuse others as well as being personally very committed.

> We could do more. The more you do, the more you can do. And it's just fascinating, whatever you do, it just goes on and on and on.

Her background as a teacher provided her with people skills, and this, coupled with a high level of motivation, have been important ingredients in the continuing development of a highly successful Centre, catering for farmers, businesses, the retired and a range of other community members.

This Community Development Officer has developed extensive links within the community and external to the community. A range of successful funding applications and awards testify to this. She has a commitment to learning, having 'learnt everything (a range of computing skills, working with a variety of people, running the business and so on) on the-the-job'. She is also undertaking further study — a business degree — to assist her in this role. As an individual she has utilised a range of learning opportunities. Her own commitment to learning is a source of enthusiasm for all those she comes into contact with and assists her in identifying community needs and establishing learning opportunities within the community to meet these needs. These may range from developing business plans, to designing and writing Webpages, to teaching Excel. Members of the Board have placed their trust in her leadership and simply request her to 'keep doing what she's doing'.

The Community Development Officer is an example of facilitative leadership in that she has worked with others to identify needs, and involve a range of stakeholders from the inception of the Centre. The early meetings where all stakeholders were present and a shared vision developed are, no doubt, key factors in the success of the community projects and the development of the Centre. Local solutions have been developed to address local issues and problems. The Community Development Officer is skilled in developing partnerships, networks and communication between stakeholders. As such she has played an important role in building considerable social capital within this community. Such leadership appears very important in getting this type of project off to a successful start, and assuring it is perceived as successful and worthy of continued support by the community. However, it runs the risk of collapsing if the key driver/leader leaves, because much of the ownership and motivation remains with one person. Despite her consultative and collaborative approach, the Community Development Officer's very ability to obviously stand out as the driving force may, however, eclipse other potential leaders in the community. It might also discourage others from participating as leaders in their own right but at different stages of the initiative's development: this is not to say the contribution of enthusiastic leaders is not crucial, but that a strategic attention to enabling leadership will result in a dispersed and varied set of people and leadership styles to surface and play out their course. Needless to say, the more people who are involved in a project, the more likely it will be to be sustainable and successful.

Discussion

The following highlight the relevant points from the vignettes:

1. Accredited training developed to serve a local need that delivers national and international training. Collaboration between a public and private provider is part of this story, however, the relationship is not an easy one. This training emerged as a result of key stakeholders working together to meet an identified industry need — namely training needs to serve the growing aquaculture industry of the area, centred around Possum Point;

2. A successful service and business being established as a result of the partners undertaking accredited VET training and having highly developed networking skills. The women in this story identified a need for a tourist information centre for the growing tourism in the region, and worked long and hard to establish support for it. Their facilitative style appeared to be important in establishing the success of this venture;

3. A Community House with strong horizontal links, and a facilitative approach to leadership, but operating without funding for a paid position (e.g. an executive officer) and without good vertical and bridging linkages. The Community House provided informal and formal non-accredited training, building the skills and confidence of those participating;

4. A community outside the main centre that reached a crisis-point and used a 'grass roots' approach to build strong support for community projects and the development of a Telecentre. The Community Development Officer in this story is funded (unlike the Community House story) and plays a key role in the development of this highly successful venture;

The four vignettes illustrate the importance of local identification of local need; of extensive networks and collaboration to effectively meet that need; of enabling leadership in carrying out these activities and in continuing to effectively meet need and facilitate collaborative arrangements.

In the Bridgetown case study (Case Study 7), the guidelines for effective collaborative partnerships were summarised. In relation to the Possum Point site, these guidelines assume relevance in describing the conditions that an enabling leadership model needs to account for. Summarised, these guidelines underlining effective collaborative partnership management are:

- Instigating of processes that develop the learning community in the location of the VET activity. That is, build the community of those who work within its organisations, ensuring that the relevant aspects of the community's histories are used as resources to meld present planning processes into future visions;

- Establishing processes such as periodic evaluation against criteria that include continuity in the community's two-way links and ongoing networks with their virtual and local communities;

- Auditing community and stakeholder social infrastructure to ensure leadership and networks are present and effective;

- Remaining aware that these relationships are likely to evolve and change over time, and that roles and responsibilities of leaders, personnel and stakeholders will change in response. This *organisational agility* is crucial for achieving sustainability of effective VET outcomes.

Conclusion

On the basis of the guidelines and the four examples in the previous section, a range of core attributes of the kind of VET leadership required to manage changing conditions can be tentatively suggested. These attributes are those required for facilitating effective VET partnerships. Clearly, a dispersed kind of 'enabling leadership' is required, one that is sensitive to the need for different styles and purposes at different developmental stages. These attributes have been established through a parallel group of research projects emanating from CRLRA (Falk & Mulford 2001; Falk & Kilpatrick 2000). This case study confirms the nature of these attributes as well as reinforcing the need for explicit attention to be paid to endorsing and resourcing enabling leadership in meeting local and national VET targets.

The six key enabling leadership attributes are:

- Building internal networks;
- Building links between internal and external networks;
- Building shared understanding of past community experiences;
- Building shared visions;
- Building shared communication;
- Building each others' self confidence and identity shifts.

The model of enabling leadership described here holds good across the data from all sites in the study. A model from the Launceston site has been selected to demonstrate the applicability of the model for community-based VET planning and development.

Synthesis:
Diversity, collaboration and quality

Introduction

This chapter considers the issues that emerge from the case studies as the research questions for Year 2 (2000) of the project are addressed, drawing further on the rich qualitative data collected. The diagram on the next page sets out the research questions and identifies how they relate to three broad issues:

(i) inter- and intra-regional diversity, including the impact of distance,

(ii) collaboration, including formal and informal structures and procedures and relationships, and

(iii) flexible delivery, including use of online and on-the-job delivery, the relationship between delivery method and quality of vocational learning and the literacy and numeracy requirements for successful participation in VET.

The structure of the chapter is to first briefly discuss changes in the sites (Research Questions 1 and 2) and how change intersects with diversity. Next, configurations of VET that are observed in the sites (Research Questions 3, 4 and 5) are considered, particularly in relation to collaboration and delivery methods. The effectiveness of the configurations in meeting the needs of the communities in the study sites (Research Question 6), quality of learning experiences, and other factors impacting on effectiveness are discussed in the following section. The final section includes considerations for actions to improve the effectiveness of VET (Research Question 7).

The data drawn on here is rich qualitative data collected in face-to-face interviews in the sites in 1999 and 2000, supplemented by telephone interviews in 2000 with respondents from the seven 1999 original sites.

Relationship between research questions and issues

Research Questions

Changes and context

1. What are the changes in Regional Australia over approximately the last 5 years in terms of:
   - Industry profiles
   - Employment demands – existing and emerging
   - Skills profiles
   - Levels of participation in education and training?

2. What are the key factors driving these changes (global, national, regional and local)?

Configurations

3. What are the different configurations of VET provision occurring and how do they relate to these changes?

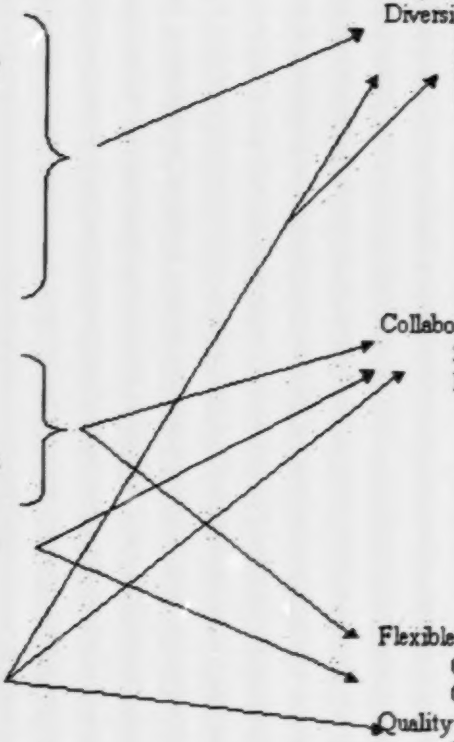
4. How and why did the different configurations of VET provision emerge?

5. How do the different configurations of VET provision meet the changing needs of stakeholders?

Effectiveness

6. How effective are the different configurations of VET provision in meeting the needs of the stakeholders?

7. What actions should be taken to improve effectiveness of VET in meeting stakeholders needs in various regions?



ISSUES

Diversity
   Distance
   Size of Community
   Managing natural resources

Collaboration
   Structure & procedures
   Relationships

Flexible delivery
   On-line
   On-the-job

Quality
   Literacy and numeracy skills

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Change and diversity

How are the sites changing?

The data presented in the site case studies and in the site descriptions from previous reports showed that the study sites are diverse. They also show that change is impacting differently on different sites and different communities within sites. Some are growing, some are experiencing a restructuring of industry, occupation or population profiles and some are in decline. These points are supported by literature cited in previous reports

There are however, some common themes that have significant implications for VET, and especially for the relationship between local VET outcomes and national consistency. Common themes relate to:

(i) distance from larger population centres, represented in the study sites by the main centre,

(ii) the small size of some rural and remote communities and

(iii) a need to learn to better manage natural resources (land and water) that was particularly evident in the rural and remote parts of the study sites.

There is a perception that the more distant and smaller communities are losing population, especially young people. A previous report noted that the Productivity Commission (1999) report found that small towns in inland Australia are in decline. Interviews in the Possum Point, Highbury and Bellbird sites and rural and remote parts of the Forrestville site, for example, report concern about a loss of young people. As well, educational participation and the range of educational institutions tend to decline with distance from larger population centres. Interviewees in the remote parts of the Bellbird and Leatherwood sites expressed concerns about access to VET and VET institutions, as did those re-interviewed in the remote parts of the Lawson and Bridgetown sites. An earlier progress report shows that all sites with the exception of Lawson, Forrestville and Leatherwood have lost population in the 15 to 24 year age bracket. In Billabong this amounted to a reduction of over one third of the age group between 1986 and 1996.

Respondents in the main centres of the Forrestville and Leatherwood sites reported growth in terms of business and industry activity, as did respondents in the Possum Point, Emu Springs and Rivertown sites. Respondents in Bellbird and Billabong reported a decline in business and industry activity. Changes in the economic health of some industries in Forrestville, have resulted in changing demands for VET. Possum Point needs more training for the growing aquaculture industry. In Billabong the downsizing and impending closure of the mine has shifted VET demand from traditional trades to tourism and hospitality. Highbury has lost much of its traditional employment in forestry, and so training needs in that area have declined.

Diversity of learning and training needs is apparent across and within sites from the case studies. For example, in the Lawson and Emu Springs sites the need for culturally sensitive VET for Indigenous communities was a major issue. The diversity of dominant industries in the sites brings with it diversity in demand for VET, for example broadacre cropping and dairy in Bellbird and information technology in the Leatherwood site.

Changes in VET

VET in regional Australia is growing and changing. Previous repots noted that many organisations in the longitudinal sample had grown since 1999, and that training providers were more likely to have grown in the 12 months than employer and community organisations. Half the public and private providers interviewed had grown larger in the 12 months since the 1999 interviews. More community-owned-and-managed training providers than public or private training providers had become smaller.

An earlier report also noted there were changes to the VET provided by over half of the organisations in the longitudinal sample and that most changes were increases in the range of Training Packages or VET courses provided. Whilst there were few reports of loss of VET opportunities, the losses reported tended to be of pre-entry level and literacy and numeracy courses that affected early school leavers and Indigenous and NESB communities (for example, in Emu Springs and Lawson).

Distance, transport and size

Some consistent themes emerge from the rural and remote parts of all ten study sites that set these locations apart from the larger, relatively well serviced main centres. The themes centre round distance and size of community.

Distance, manifested in the poor availability of public transport, and the cost and time for travel to access services, including education and training, disadvantages rural and remote residents. Even in the peri-urban site (Leatherwood), transport difficulties gave rise to difficulties of access to VET. Young people, unable to afford their own car and often too young to drive, are especially affected by the barrier of distance. Online delivery is not necessarily a way of overcoming the disadvantage of distance; for example people in the Forrestville site noted that in the cyclone season telephone lines can be down for up to six weeks. The remote parts of the Bellbird site highlight the difficulties of providing and accessing training for many rural industries and enterprises whose nature and location puts opportunities for participating in (or providing) most formal VET programs beyond reach as a consequence of unrealistic or uneconomic commuting distances.

Thin markets are a feature of the remote and rural locations due to the small size of communities, especially those more distant from larger centres. Thin markets were perceived to restrict choice and increase the cost of delivery in Billabong, Rivertown, Highbury and the rural parts of Forrestville. Rural schools with, usually limited, VET programs are the only providers in most of the rural and remote locations, if there is a 'resident' provider at all. Small community size limits choice of VET in several ways. Options for face-to-face courses are few and limited work placements in remote and rural sites are barriers to accessing on-the-job training. Flexible, distance delivery using either electronic or print-based materials is an option, but choice is limited by available courses, the potential client's knowledge of what is available, access to computers and other required equipment and the potential student's capacity and motivation to operate as an independent learner.

Small communities were also cited as working against the success of group or other collaborative arrangements for planning and delivering VET. Collaboration between rural schools in the delivery of VET through auspicing each others' courses overcame some of the barriers imposed by small class sizes in the rural and remote parts of the Bridgetown site. External linkages (networks) are especially important in small communities for accessing funding and negotiating appropriate training. The effect of small community size on the effectiveness of VET outcomes is discussed further later in this chapter.

Learning to manage natural resources

People in the rural and remote areas of all the sites, including the peri-urban Leatherwood site, were more likely to report a need to learn about environmental issues than are people in the main centres. Successfully managing natural resources is becoming increasingly important for the agriculture, forestry and tourism industries and these processes require successful vocational learning on the part of community members and groups. The River Bank project at Rivertown (Case Study 3) is an example of a collaborative resource management project with many learning implications and outcomes. At Leatherwood A in the Leatherwood site the community learnt to manage conflict and diversity as they came to collaborate around natural resource management issues.

Configurations of VET

How do networks value-add VET?

VET configurations, as defined in the Introduction to this report, are the various combinations of human and physical resources that produce the VET outputs for a site. Most organisations in the study sites use ongoing relationships, collaborative, partnership or negotiated approaches in planning or delivering training. This networking activity usually, but not always, involves training providers in the planning and negotiation process.

Employers, training providers and representatives of community organisations re-interviewed in 2000 were asked about who in the community they worked with in planning and delivering VET. Eighty per cent of the organisations in the seven original sites work with at least one provider in planning or delivering training, or one other provider in the case of organisations that are themselves providers. Over half of all those interviewed work with training providers from more than one 'sector'. Sectors for this purpose include schools, group training companies, TAFEs, other RTOs, ACE providers and universities. Strong evidence of networking and building of relationships between organisations was evident in the majority of sites, and is discussed further later in this chapter.

The organisational respondents were generally positive about the effectiveness of groups, committees and ongoing relationships between providers and clients for planning and delivering training. There were some differences in perceptions of effectiveness by site, with organisations in Lawson being less likely to report that the arrangements met all or most of their needs well and most of those in Possum Point being quite satisfied. Interviewees in Emu Springs and Billabong cited collaborative arrangements between groups as a major factor in the success of VET in that site, even though collaborative activity in Billabong appears to be more limited than in other sites, and primarily delivered through community-based providers and other organisations.

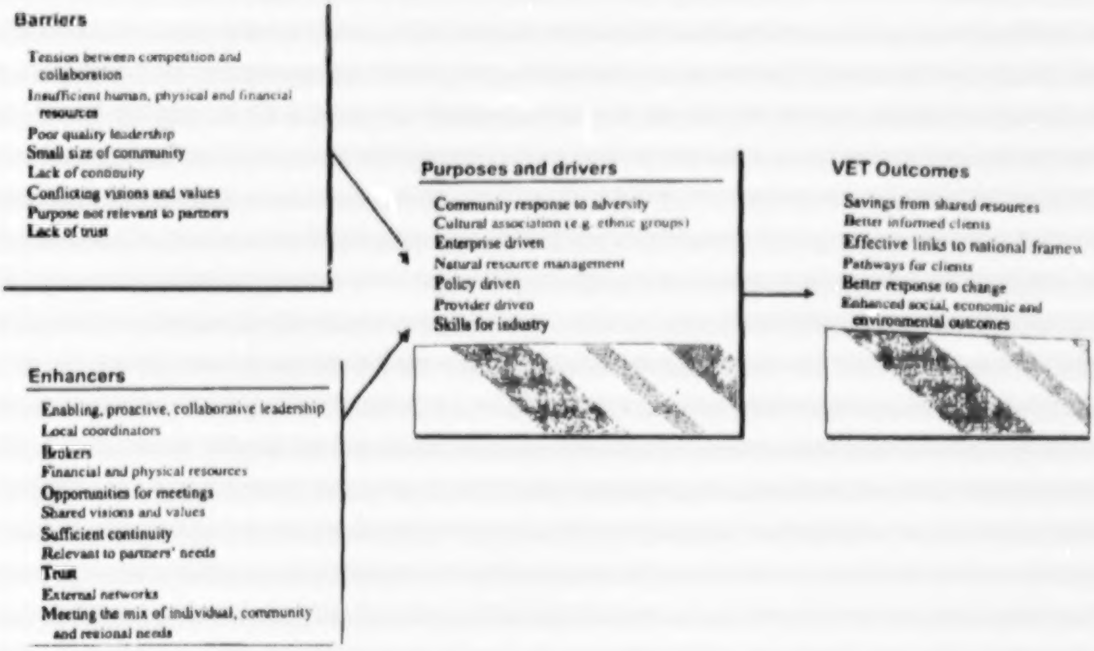
Partnerships and collaborations are numerous, effective and diverse

The types of organisations and training providers that feature in the collaborative groups vary across sites. For example, community-based providers and other community organisations such as government agencies were major players in groups in Leatherwood A in the Leatherwood site, Highbury and Billabong, whereas private providers featured strongly in Emu Springs and Rivertown. Almost all organisations and training providers interviewed in Bridgetown were in some kind of multi-partner collaborative arrangement. Schools feature in the collaborative groups in most communities in most sites. Local government featured in collaborative groups in the peri-urban Leatherwood site as well as a number of the more rural sites.

Partnerships are often built on information sharing across local government, State government, national government, business and industry. Collaboration and partnerships are never simple, nor are they uniform in their influence and outcomes. In each case collaboration occurs for specific purposes in specific places at specific times, and its very nature means that some stakeholders will be included and other groups may not. It seems the trick of initiators of collaborative efforts is to know who should be involved in the situation in hand. However, knowing who should be involved, and actually achieving the involvement of the desired parties, are often two different matters, for reasons that may be beyond the control of any planning group.

The case studies reported many partnerships and collaborations related to VET. The report on the 1999 phase of the project, noted that partnerships varied according to their purpose, members, intensity (frequency of meeting) and duration. Here the partnerships and collaborations observed in the study sites principally in relation to their purpose, driver or motivating factors are discussed, noting the members involved where relevant. In the next section some of the factors that influence the effectiveness of the observed partnerships and collaborations are considered. That discussion draws and builds on the elements of effective partnerships identified in an earlier report. These elements are human and physical resources (including continuity of personnel), vision, coherence and continuity, relevance to participants' needs, relationships among partners and mix of individual, community and regional focus. The following diagram summarises the purposes, drivers or motivating factors for partnerships and collaborations and the factors that influence the effectiveness of their outcomes.

Dynamics of VET collaboration (this diagram seems to be only partially there and has problems with the text within it – ie it doesn't make any sense)


Barriers
Tension between competition and collaboration
Insufficient human, physical and financial resources
Poor quality leadership
Small size of community
Lack of continuity
Conflicting visions and values
Purpose not relevant to partners
Lack of trust
Enhancers
Enabling, proactive, collaborative leadership
Local coordinators
Brokers
Financial and physical resources
Opportunities for meetings
Shared visions and values
Sufficient continuity
Relevant to partners' needs
Trust
External networks
Meeting the mix of individual, community and regional needs
Purposes and drivers
Community response to adversity
Cultural association (e.g. ethnic groups)
Enterprise driven
Natural resource management
Policy driven
Provider driven
Skills for industry
VET Outcomes
Savings from shared resources
Better informed clients
Effective links to national framew
Pathways for clients
Better response to change
Enhanced social, economic and environmental outcomes

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The next sections of the report discuss the purposes, drivers and motivating factors for the collaborations and partnerships found in the study sites, the barriers and enhancers for effective outcomes from VET that are related to these, and the outcomes from collaborative activity around VET.

Some partnerships from the sites

This section examines a range of partnerships and collaborative arrangements for planning and delivering training. All have set about meeting local needs, but have been initiated by different groups or organisations and gone about meeting needs in different ways. They are set out here according to the purpose of the activity, or driver behind the collaboration. All the partnerships and collaborations have used VET as a way to manage change.

Community collaborative response to adversity

VETwork, described in Case Study 4, is a highly developed example of a whole-community or community-development collaboration that includes VET as just one of the elements. This is a community-driven multi-sectoral collaboration whose partners include TAFE, CDEP, government agencies at State and local levels, local businesses, the Business Enterprise Centre and the high school. Other examples are Billabong's Industry as Heritage project, a community-owned response to the main industry closure that has significantly reduced employment in Billabong (see Case Study 1), Leatherwood C's new information technology centre (Case Study 9) and Possum Point A's Telecentre (see Case Study 10). Not all have large numbers of partners – the Possum Point A Telecentre is largely a collaboration among individual residents of the town. Like VETwork, Leatherwood C's information technology centre has multiple partners and strong links within and external to the community. It has linkages with local businesses, TAFE, the community college, employment service, community groups, government agencies and the Council.

Collaborations based on cultural association

Collaborations between providers and Indigenous communities at Lawson (Case Study 5) and Emu Springs were based on cultural association. Government funding had assisted in the establishment of separate Indigenous VET provider organisations in the Lawson site which established separate partner relationships with different Indigenous communities. These organisations often were duplicated by others in the (separate) non-Indigenous VET sector.

Enterprise-driven partnerships

A small number of interviewees spoke of negotiating training with providers to meet (agricultural) enterprise needs in the Highbury and Bellbird sites. The Highbury example appears in the report on the 1999 part of this longitudinal project. No examples were encountered in other industries in the study sites. However it is not easy in a remote location to arrange local training, as this farmer explains:

> It is up to you usually to organise it and that's always the factor, you have to ring, get the funding or get the tutor, organise the travel, organise the accommodation and all that takes a lot of effort. It's not just one phone call.

Natural resource management and community-led multi-sectoral collaborations

Leatherwood A's environmental learning collaboration, involving the Neighbourhood Centre and environment groups, as described in the Leatherwood case study (Case Study 9) is one example of multi-sectoral collaboration focussed on natural resource management. Partners in this collaboration included Landcare, environment groups, the Neighbourhood Centre and, with a weaker link, the school that shared learning resources. Rivertown's River Bank project, described in the Rivertown case study (Case Study 4) is another example of multi-sector community-led collaboration around natural resource management.

Policy-driven collaborations

User choice and competition policy has forced providers in some locations to collaborate with individual enterprises and groups of enterprises to deliver relevant training, as reported in the Forrestville case study (Case Study 2). The need to find work placements for students is a common driver for collaboration between providers and enterprises in all sites.

Provider-driven collaborations
Rural high schools in the Bridgetown and Highbury sites initiated VET-in-schools programs to provide training opportunities in their communities for young people leaving school, in Highbury in collaboration with TAFE (Case Studies 7 and 8). The schools have developed partnerships with industry and employers in their own communities and beyond to source work placements. In the Bridgetown site the schools are collaborating to deliver a wide range of VET courses through auspicing arrangements and multi-site Skills Centres.

The increased participation in Indigenous TAFE courses in Bridgetown was initiated by an Indigenous TAFE program coordinator, as described in Case Study 7. Lawson's [named] College moving out into the Indigenous communities instead of expecting the people to come to them in Lawson is in recognition of the special needs of Indigenous communities and the best way to service those needs (see Case Study 5).

Personal linkages between providers themselves and between providers and community members are especially strong in smaller centres. This provider from the Lawson site illustrates how a willingness to share information can solve training needs for clients and generate business for providers, forms the basis of an informal partnership and reinforces the importance of relevant networks:

> I went up the street the other day to buy some bananas and the banana-man says, 'I need a trainee in horticulture', which we do from the state's capital city, so I took his details down and the lady sitting next to him says, 'I need someone to work out on the station, to do stock and station skills'. Well we don't do that, so I rang up the Rural College and passed that on.

Skills development for industry
Some collaborations are motivated by industry's need for a skilled workforce in the community, for example Leatherwood's multi-sector collaboration and Possum Point's aquaculture collaboration. Leatherwood's business-based, local-council-supported collaboration to develop skills for new industries and maintain skills for existing industries is an example of multi-sectoral collaboration (see Case Study 9). The Possum Point [specific name] Centre is a collaboration between industry, State and local government, university and TAFE to provide skills for the growing aquaculture industry (see Case Study 10).

Small communities in the Bellbird and Highbury sites had a long tradition of community organisations working together to provide non-formal and informal learning and training activities in agriculture and related areas. These groups had developed cultures and informal structures that facilitated effective collaborative training in their communities. The Bellbird dairy industry is a good example of long and successful traditions of collaboration. TAFE in Bellbird has worked closely with the dairy industry to develop an award-winning dairy employee training program. However, competition policy is now putting this collaboration between TAFE and other providers at risk. The three main providers each concentrated on different areas in the past but are now openly competing and duplicating programs, reducing the range available in the community.

What makes partnerships and collaborations work?

Partnerships and collaborations for VET provision in rural and regional Australia face particular challenges and the ingredients of success vary according to the resources available to the collaborative effort, the organisations involved and their goals. National, State and local government policy impacts directly and indirectly on the outcomes of partnerships and collaborations. The factors that enhance the effectiveness of partnerships and collaborations are:

- proactive, collaborative, enabling leadership,
- local coordinators and brokers (human resources),
- sufficient financial and physical resources,

- external networks,
- meeting a mix of individual, community and regional needs,
- shared visions and values,
- sufficient continuity of leaders and programs,
- collaborations need to be highly relevant to visions, values and goals of the partners, and
- trust.

Proactive, visionary, energetic, enabling leadership
Successful community partnerships and collaborations tend to be related to certain characteristics of the leader(s). Characteristics associated with success include a clear and collective vision, particularly one that is collaborative and goal oriented. People in leadership roles need a positive outlook, a people orientation, and, related to this, the ability to inspire enthusiasm and nurture leadership in others. VETwork's committee in Emu Springs is 'always looking out for opportunity and anything that is going to make a difference'. This Billabong interview describes an enabling activity that exposed volunteers to a new learning situation:

> [We] let them get a feel for what a conference is all about and sit in the body. We actually made sure lots of locals got invites to the opening ... at the end, there was a resolution from volunteers that we want to have our own conference, and we want to be right inside. So this year eventually we are having a conference for volunteers... what happens is that I can pull on those thirty people as a team, you know, to go onto something else.

Rural leadership programs that trained visionary, enabling leaders were encountered in the Highbury and Bellbird sites.

The collaborative approach comprises two main aspects: one, a community-oriented needs-based approach which aims to determine the needs of the community/client base through consultation, and two, a proactive approach that seeks collaboration and partnerships with other organisations in the community to share information and best utilise resources.

A public provider from the Forrestville site gives a good example of community oriented needs-based approach, in this case for Indigenous students. The provider attributes the partnerships it has forged with industry and communities to VET policy:

> In the past vocational education and training has been very much directed by the providers as opposed to the client and so you don't necessarily have a good match between what has been offered and what people are wanting in terms of training and education. So that hasn't worked for the benefit of Indigenous people, hence the reason for us starting into this what was then an online area of developing courses that people were wanting, but also taking it to where people were working and living... that is an imperative of the Institute to have that kind of industry link and community link and vice versa and certainly funding in particular areas or for particularly areas of vocational education and training make those linkages mandatory .

A proactive approach that seeks collaboration and partnerships with other organisations in the community to share information and best utilise resources was observed to be facilitated by key individuals. A community organisation representative in Emu Springs describes a proactive, partnership approach:

> When people need a service, need an employer, need an employee, need training whatever, they then tend to give us a ring and I hope that continues. We actively foster those relationships and my 2IC ... also spends a lot of time out on the road talking and identifying training and employment opportunities. We have a package deal approach when she's doing outreach and talking to employers ... it's more of a collaborative concerted front and that seems to work very well. I think, if we just ignored everybody for 12 months we'd probably lose an awful lot of credibility, we don't, we work very hard. I sit on a few committees.

Human resources
The structure, procedures and culture of the group and people working in a leadership role were mentioned frequently as contributing to successful outcomes of partnerships and collaborations. This highlights the importance of having resources and human and social infrastructure to ensure that collaborative and cooperative arrangements function effectively.

There are some common properties that characterise successful leadership in planning and negotiating VET in rural communities that apply to most types of organisations, from public, private, and community-based providers to community development organisations. These include firstly, a collaborative approach; secondly, having visionary, energetic, enabling leaders and thirdly, effective links and networks to organisations and resources outside the community.

The human element in the form of coordinators plays a pivotal role in managing VET collaborations and partnerships. Individuals who work in a coordinating role were one of the most frequently mentioned factors contributing to the success of partnerships and collaborations across all sites. Respondents in Possum Point, Rivertown, Bridgetown and Billabong, for example, reported that effective workplace coordinators were essential in facilitating cooperation and ensuring that the on-the-job components of training met the needs and standards required by employers, trainees and the training providers.

Brokers of VET are becoming an increasingly important element within the success of VET programs in some communities. Brokers are mediators who link those seeking a particular VET intervention with possible providers of VET courses.

Volunteerism plays a large part in a number of partnerships between literacy and numeracy providers and local communities. Here community members give of their time and expertise to assist migrants and other Australians having difficulties in this area of life skills. Volunteerism also plays a part in a number of programs such as business mentorships and Indigenous role model mentorship programs. Often service clubs support these community programs with their human and financial resources. Landcare is another program example that relies heavily on partnerships with individual volunteers in communities.

Financial and physical resources
Access to resources, such as a building, provided a focal point for collaboration amongst community groups and community-based providers in the Leatherwood site. A common site or building facilitated collaboration and partnerships in Emu Springs and at the [named industry] site in Lawson. Collaboration and partnerships are becoming evident around information technology provision, especially in communities away from the main centres. This may be because of the resources and infrastructure required for information technology. Partnerships and collaborations require sufficient funds to be successful. The examples of the impact of funding encountered in the sites all related to insufficient funds, and are discussed in the section on barriers later in this chapter.

External networks
Chambers of commerce in some areas play an active role, as do Area Consultative Committees (ACCs) and regional economic development boards. The organisations that were most notable for their activity had extensive networks – internal, external, vertical, horizontal, weak and strong ties. Organisations with Boards or Committees of Management often have extensive linkages and networks through the people on their Board. These networks in turn are used to access weak links (Granovetter 1973) for information and for resources. Government agencies can play a brokerage role, providing 'ins' to external networks. For example, in Possum Point, the resources of the State's department of primary industries were used to negotiate with providers to deliver training to the farming community and in Bellbird training for farmers in managing water quality was facilitated by a local community development association with strong networks that sourced funding for the training.

Meeting mix of individual, community and regional needs
Partnerships and collaborations that take account of the needs of individuals, the community and the broader region have more effective VET outcomes. VET-in-schools programs in

several sites are good examples of this mix. Individual school students receive training, the community retains youth who would otherwise leave and industry in the region has a pool of skilled labour. Programs that consider social as well as economic needs, such as the VETworks collaboration in Emu Springs, tend to meet a mix of individual, community and regional needs.

Other factors
Several other important enhancers to VET collaboration are evident. These are:

- shared visions and values,
- sufficient continuity of leaders, between leaders of different project stages, and programs,
- collaborations need to be highly relevant to visions, values and goals of the partners, and
- trust.

These factors are most evident when low or absent and are discussed in the following section on barriers.

What are the barriers to effective outcomes from partnerships and collaborations?

Features cited most often as working against the success of collaborative training arrangements are:

- a tension between competition and collaboration,
- inadequate human and physical resourcing and funding arrangements,
- the small size of the community,
- lack of continuity of policy and programs, and
- lack of a common vision, values or understanding, often manifested in a lack of local input and ownership of training.

Tension between competition and collaboration
There is a lot of concern expressed in the data about mixed signals from government concerning the need for collaboration and the drive towards ever increasing competition. In some cases competition directly stops or inhibits collaboration. Relationships amongst providers and businesses appear to be more limited and bounded by fears that collaborating with the competition will result in a loss of market share in the Leatherwood site. In the Forrestville site, private providers collaborated to compete against TAFE, a situation not necessarily in the best interests of clients in terms of the range of available courses and support for learners. A new collaborative group in the [name of region] of the Forrestville site shows early signs of improving the range and quality of training. However, members have some concerns about the tension between competition, which requires information to be kept confidential, and collaboration, which requires information sharing. This is discussed in Case Study 2.

Resourcing and leadership
Effective collaborations require leaders who are prepared to take on the initial responsibility, who have the skills, efficacy and commitment, and who do not let money and capital investment stand in the way. The leaders may change from the initial phase to the maintenance stage, but resourcing of leadership continuity is important. When resourcing matters are considered, funds, accommodation and equipment are often considerations. However, the availability of enabling leadership needs also to be considered as a vital resource, needing explicit recognition. These interviewees explain:

> Oh its hard, always ... You've got to come back to the person of responsibility and someone who is prepared to do all that work – to put the work in and things.

> People have got too much of a possessive feeling about it ... a lot of volunteer organisations spend so much time in trying to maintain a capital thing of some description and it's just exhausting. You get taken away from your focus of what you are actually wanting to be doing.

Small communities

A lack of a critical mass of training providers resident in communities and few organisations in small communities hinder the formation of partnerships and collaborations between groups. (on p.126 it was claimed that group collaboration is hindered by the small size of communities and on p.131 personal linkages are strong in smaller centre and on p.138 a lack of resources in small communities leads to collaboration)For example, the distance between high schools in small population centres hindered collaborative offerings in Highbury and the rural part of the Leatherwood site. A lack of sufficient numbers of people to form committees and share the tasks required to collaborate to plan for VET was cited in small communities in many of the sites.

Lack of continuity

Loss of funding in the area of literacy and numeracy for Indigenous programs in Lawson meant there was nowhere for people with these needs to go and, because of the nature of their problem, these people could not access other provisions. People in a number of sites spoke about the loss of Skillshare programs that had been very successful in training individuals as well as meeting community and regional needs.

Lack of continuity of programs across State boundaries hindered access to VET for potential clients in Bellbird and Billabong, and hindered collaborative arrangements in the Bellbird site.

Conflicting visions, values and understandings

Different and inconsistent visions, values and understandings that affected VET outcomes related to cultural differences, local-versus-external perspectives of the community and newcomers versus 'entrenched' formal leaders. The data from the Lawson and Emu Springs sites in particular suggests there is a great need for some collaborative vision across different Indigenous communities. A broad perspective includes the need to make a broad range of connections, to look at many different views and both sides of an argument, to reconcile. The available data indicates that, for Indigenous people, collaboration is as much a process of reconciliation — between blacks and blacks as much as between whites and blacks. Non-consultative, external top-down approaches to literacy and numeracy training for NESB people in Emu Springs and for Indigenous people in the Lawson and Forrestville sites reduced effectiveness. This Corrections Officer describes a typical situation:

> It's not really happening because I think that we are often trying to import our training from environments outside the necessary environment. The courses that we deliver are often pitched at too high a level for some of the company here, that's very common with people from remote communities ... they need some kind of special literacy course and such things can be done. It simply means that we have to tap into the need more than what's available.

Decision making external to community does not necessarily take into account local visions and values, or local resources and needs. The decisions made about the TAFE Annexe in Rivertown (Case Study 3) are an example of this. Reduction of local government infrastructure in Highbury significantly reduced the capacity of the community to form partnerships to plan VET by reducing the human resources available to collaborate, and reducing work placements in the community. Funding criteria often brings about collaboration which can bring with it its own difficulties such as relationships with providers who are thousands of kilometres distant and providing programs such as the literacy example in the Forrestville site which have strong community-situated implications for ongoing success.

Newcomers who bring new ideas and external networks do not always share the same values and understandings as older, entrenched formal leaders, making change difficult, as this interviewee explains:

> There are some people in town who are on a thousand committees …Young professionals come in, they are quite destroyed in a place like this. Their motivation goes very quickly, because you've got the people who have been in the position for twenty years who probably just got the position and had no idea what they were supposed to be doing anyway. And they crunch these people down.

Conflicting visions and values often occur when the partners are forced to collaborate by policy. A lack of trust is a symptom of a collaboration where the partners' visions and values conflict.(what of the arguemnt in Vig. 1 Possum Point about a task-oriented collaboration? How does this sit? Does lack of trust eventually destroy the collaboration/project is the task is not bounded by time?)VET outcomes of effective collaborations

Effective collaborations maximise the outcomes from scarce human, physical and financial resources in regional communities. Often the need to avoid duplication of services and maximise the range of opportunities in small communities with access to few resources is mentioned as a reason for collaboration. In similar vein the pooling of resources is an important driver of collaboration/partnerships between people and organisations in the more isolated communities away from the larger main sites of the research.

Most collaborative efforts across the sites have a business or industry work-related focus, but the richest ones are those that include other supportive life skills such as social skills, literacy and numeracy, identity and self efficacy development. VET-in-schools brings with it very strong partnerships, especially in communities with a sense of young people's work needs. Here partnerships/collaboration between schools, TAFE, other VET providers or participants, local government, industry, chambers of commerce and local communities contributes to some of the most innovative programs and successful outcomes of VET.

Outcomes of effective collaborations can be summarised as:

- savings from shared resources,
- better informed VET clients (individuals, enterprises and communities),
- identified, accessible pathways for clients,
- better community response to change, and
- enhanced social, economic and environmental outcomes.

Approaches that do not seek collaboration

Some organisations appear quite successful (to those leading them) without doing much collaborating. They are resistant to a collaborative model of VET provision, in terms of collaborating with other providers or community development agencies. The collaborative model is viewed as time consuming and distracting an organisation's focus from its core activities. Organisations providing a specific service or program, such as basic literacy and numeracy training or computer training, often may not need to collaborate widely with other organisations to be successful. Private providers also appear to 'succeed' (at least in terms of making a profit if not in terms of creating community cohesion) with minimal collaboration.

Flexible delivery

There is some evidence of a move toward more flexible delivery methods in the short time (12 months) since the original interviews. More on-the-job training was reported in all sites, and particularly in Possum Point. There were new training providers in Billabong, Highbury, Rivertown and Lawson. Nine organisations in four sites reported more online delivery. They included Emu Springs and Rivertown, where the TAFE regional campus/annexe had increased flexible delivery activities, and Highbury and Bridgetown, where public and private providers had increased customisation of courses to meet client needs. A new community-based information technology training provider in Leatherwood C (in the Leatherwood site) was established with close links to business, government, educational institutions and community groups. A number of the farmers interviewed in the Bellbird site spoke of the effectiveness of informal learning using the Internet as a learning source.

Flexible delivery, delivery in many workplace sites and customisation of courses for particular clients were perceived to have improved the effectiveness of VET in the sites. Employers in Possum Point, for example, spoke highly of *flexible and relevant training* delivered by trainers with industry experience, but noted that the quality of trainers varied widely, as did the quality of training. In another example, a trainee in Billabong was pleased to report that her provider was able to customise a module to her needs after she complained that it was too general. Flexible delivery provides an educational option for the youth to enable them to remain in the locality. However, not all courses can be successfully delivered to remote locations via flexible means, especially those with a large practical component.

However, *flexibility is resource intensive*, and the small numbers of students and large distances between workplace learning sites in rural and remote areas means that providers struggle to make the funds received to provide training cover the costs of delivery. This problem was noted, for example, in Possum Point and the rural parts of the Bridgetown site, where there had been an increase in flexibility of delivery since 1999. A wide range of interviewees identified the difficulties encountered and costs incurred when employees are required to go off-site for training courses, block release or workshops. Providers reported they did not have sufficient funding to provide necessary support for students who lacked the literacy, numeracy and independent learning skills necessary to study in remote workplaces using print or electronic self-paced learning materials.

The *isolation of students imposed by self-paced and wholly or largely on-the-job training* was seen as detrimental to learning outcomes in the Leatherwood and Highbury sites. Specific groups also do not relate well to flexible delivery. These included Indigenous, migrants, middle-aged and people with learning difficulties. The long list of reasons why students experienced problems accessing flexible delivery, including online delivery, noted in the Forrestville site alone included: lack of computer skills, preference for face-to-face learning, inadequate literacy skills, accustomed to traditional classroom environment, unable to negotiate courses and lack of confidence. A TAFE Institute operating in Possum Point explained how it was able to deliver relevant, quality training at a distance. Amalgamation of campuses meant there was now a huge range of courses that could be undertaken via distance education, although most did require one week's attendance at a centralised location during the year. Lecturers provided pastoral care to students on a regular basis. Students were also encouraged to telephone lecturers. Staff participated in staff development programs in respect to supporting students in their courses. The Institute indicated that the attrition rate for flexible delivery was low. The desirability of combining online and all forms of self-paced delivery with some face-to-face communication with trainers and other students was echoed in many of the sites.

This Leatherwood public training provider sums up the positives and negatives of online flexible delivery for students, noting the role of peer interaction in learning:

> The main, the up if you like is that it's asynchronous communication that you can actually provide the material for students so they can actually access the material at a time that suits them ... Other positives are that you can actually come up with some quite innovative approaches and you can make it much more interactive than you could as standard distance learning type program ... The downs are, from the students' point of view, is actually lack of contact with each other, it's often the peer issues that are the ones that are missing, rather than necessarily even the lecturer-student interface and it's the fact that people feel and know that they're working in isolation, is actually one of the down sides and that's one of the reasons that you have a higher wastage in withdrawal rate.

Funding bodies and providers that are not in touch with local needs were perceived to reduce the effectiveness of VET. In Emu Springs, for example, funding national providers who did not understand the literacy and numeracy needs of the NESB Muslim community over local providers who had appropriate skills and experience reduced the effectiveness of training. Similar concerns were expressed in the Forrestville site, where several of the training providers interviewed who service the entire region found it difficult to talk in terms of training delivered to just the three centres under investigation. Community-based providers and training arranged by community organisations was perceived to be particularly effective in Highbury for retraining the forestry industry which is undergoing restructuring, for women, and for people with low literacy.

Effectiveness

This section considers the effectiveness of VET provision in meeting the needs of stakeholders (individuals, enterprises, industries and whole communities) in the ten study sites. It first refers briefly to perceptions of the overall effectiveness of VET, effectiveness for particular groups and the outcomes of courses studied in 1999 for the community members and learners re-interviewed in 2000 that were reported in a previous report. The section goes on to examine issues related to quality learning that appear to influence the effectiveness of VET in the ten sites.

Perceptions of effectiveness

An earlier report noted that VET services in smaller centres, especially in rural and remote areas, are not perceived as adequate by representatives of community groups, employers and training providers who live and/or work in these communities. VET services for young people, small and large business and industry are perceived as adequate in only some sites, while the needs of those needing re-training are not well met across all sites. The needs of industry are perceived to be especially poorly met in the rural and remote parts of the sites.

Course participation in 1999 led to improved self confidence and better performance in existing jobs for most participants, with few obtaining a new job as a result of their course. There is some evidence that suggests that employers and other organisations in their study sites have an increasingly positive orientation toward training and see a relationship between training and success in achieving organisation goals. Organisational respondents in Highbury and Rivertown, for example, spoke about employers in the agricultural industry providing more accredited training for their staff because they believed it would benefit their business.

Quality learning

'Quality is a journey, not a final destination' (Hager 1997, pp. 23). With this statement in mind, this section of the report focuses on aspects for change and improvement for the process of quality learning. In order to summarise aspects of 'quality learning' in regional Australia it is necessary to acknowledge that perceptions of 'quality' vary according to the perspective of respondents. The data from a cross-section of respondents (institutions delivering training, students/trainees learning and employers utilising the product) reveals several major themes relating to quality learning. Many of these themes intersect but for the purpose of clarity they will, as far as possible, be dealt with separately here.

While many issues ultimately relate to funding it is not necessarily the case that reduced levels of spending have an adverse effect on quality or that increased levels of spending automatically enhance quality (Simmons 1994). It is evident from the data that there are more specific and complex problems involved in providing quality learning. These include:

- the quality and professional development of educators,
- professionalism versus profit,
- the nature of national Training Packages, appropriate forms of literacy and numeracy as inhibitors,
- assessment of trainees/apprentices, outcomes of learning measured by employment opportunities and workplace relevance,
- user choice in terms of access and availability, and

- other matters of policy, including the tension between competition and collaboration.

These are the key themes of this section.

Trainers and teachers – quality and professional development

Data from all sites indicates a growing awareness of the importance of professional development. Recognition of the changing skill levels required for educators and trainers, particularly in terms of the VET standards of delivery and increasing expectations from employers, are major drivers for professional development. A lack of monitoring of the *quality of facilitators, trainers and assessors*, combined with a shortage of proficient facilitators and trainers capable of delivering in some areas (topics) was a concern in most sites. In some cases one person moving away from an area meant training in a whole industry area ceased (for example in Rivertown the tutor delivering construction courses had left the district, and while there were new opportunities in the office and retail areas, these courses were not seen as adequate replacements for the construction students). Respondents in rural parts of the Leatherwood site expressed concern about untrained facilitators in community organisations. A lack of trainers skilled at working with Indigenous communities was noted at the Lawson site. Casualisation and the part-time, short-term, contractual nature of employment was blamed by a large Forrestville provider for the poor quality of teachers and trainers available. The current funding arrangements leave limited resources available for professional development and the nature of employment contracts give little incentive for providers or individual trainers to invest in professional development. Training providers in Possum Point and Forrestville cited a shortage of funding for quality relief teachers and travelling distance as major inhibitors for participation in professional development. A public training provider in Leatherwood advised that teachers need to meet certain benchmarks for entry into further training. Once they have achieved this level they receive extensive professional development in terms of additional training, some time at TAFE and some on-the-job training.

It was generally thought that quality teachers are in great demand and at times over-utilised. Many teachers need to be 'out there, in the field' to service on-the-job training and at the institution itself to deliver 'run of the mill courses' which constitute core funding. Quality learning is a major concern for on-the-job training, when primarily delivered by employers. Respondents across sites believe the workloads of many employer/trainers allow little time for quality training. In addition the communication skills of the employer are perceived as a vital element of success. Not only do training providers need to develop their expertise in terms of negotiation with employers but they are often expected to train the employers in their training responsibilities also. Perceptions vary, however, regarding the quality of employer-delivered training, and a training provider in Possum Point claimed examples of excellent planning and quality time investment. For VET delivery to Indigenous groups there was a perceived lack of culturally sensitive tutors in some sites.

Professionalism versus profit

A more competitive training market has been encouraged by Australian governments, as well as increasing community demand for quality as they pay more for courses. This has ensured that quality assurance is now a major VET priority, according to Hager (1997). This increase in competition, however, does have its drawbacks. Training providers and recipients across several sites including Forrestville and Bridgetown expressed disillusionment with the new TAFE system. Their negative perceptions are based on a belief that the choice of TAFE courses is being driven by a need for profit rather than a desire to provide quality learning. In turn this undermines client confidence and the perceived value of the accreditation gained. Reduced prerequisites for entry to some courses like welfare, tourism and engineering, driven by a need for student numbers, has led to further disillusionment with the quality and value of accreditation and a greater demand for quality assurance from prospective students. Funding based on student numbers stimulates competition between training providers but in regional areas this competition does not necessarily lead to better quality training. A training provider in Highbury suggests that competition can also result in a decrease in quality if tenders are set unrealistically low in order to win the business. It was generally thought that the positive elements of competition are not always realised in the small regional communities with thin markets.

National Training Packages

Pressure to abandon courses customised for local markets and adopt national Training Packages has led to some concerns from training providers, across the sites, regarding the quality of learning. A respondent from Leatherwood TAFE said 'whereas 10 years ago TAFE would design its own courses [...] now we've got industry training boards, the industry representatives are on them, but not training representatives [...] and they make decisions about what courses to do, so we at TAFE only deliver the courses which come to us as Training Packages'. A Forrestville private RTO which uses national Training Packages mainly for hospitality said that the ITABs had not resolved problems relating to construction and furnishing packages yet so they were still not being utilised. This same respondent said there is a proliferation of Training Packages and that they could have been consolidated (and taxpayers' money saved) by customising already existing packages. A respondent from Forrestville TAFE said that although they are used extensively, national Training Packages lack quality for some people because they assume high literacy levels and do not contain culturally specific material for Indigenous groups. A Forrestville organisation representative said that:

> We're having to make compromises to get stuff accredited ... if Indigenous people want to do specific qualifications, fine, they can't also, at the same time, acquire the competencies which will give them qualifications from national Training Packages. You have to either do the mainstream thing or you have to do the Indigenous thing and there's no equitable linking up of the two systems.

Literacy and numeracy levels

Possession of appropriate literacy and numeracy skills, for training, work and other tasks, was perceived to be a major barrier to quality learning across all sites. While the problem was more significant in areas with high Indigenous and/or NESB populations like Forrestville, Lawson and Emu Springs, it was by no means restricted to these sites. Training providers advised that literacy levels were, at times, an inhibitor for successful apprenticeships because of the level of written material required for assessment. In addition, national Training Packages and flexible delivery, often a successful method of training in rural and remote areas, assume high standards of literacy and therefore are not appropriate choices for all students. It is also very difficult for instructional designers to tailor programs to varying literacy levels. Government policy favouring the funding of courses that are directly job related over those of entry-level literacy and numeracy compounds the problems. Unemployed people who have poor literacy skills are further disadvantaged because they are unable to access job-training courses.

Assessment of trainees/apprentices

While the formal framework of a traineeship contract encourages employers to deliver quality learning and assessment, it is not a guarantee. The time constraints on employers and their consequent effect on assessment were a recurring perceived problem across sites. At Possum Point, training providers and trainees have evidence that the practice of automatically signing off on traineeship competency criteria, without formal assessment, does occur. The Bellbird Technical College found the lengthy process of assessment for workplace students 'a burden for their staff' but claimed that employing people from the outside was too costly. A private employer in Forrestville found it necessary to 'take people off the job' to conduct assessments for trainees and thus diminish productivity. A public employer in Leatherwood claimed that the while competency-based assessment is perceived as a driver for quality learning it creates insecurity and therefore resistance from some staff. Bridgetown interviewees noted inconsistencies in assessment standards attributed to inadequately trained assessors. A trainee enrolled in a small business course in Possum Point had negative perceptions of his assessment, saying that he only saw his assessor twice in a year; the assessor watched him perform a task as part of a team and then signed off the 'teamwork' criterion on his assessment documents.

Quality learning measured by outcomes

While outcomes are just one element of determining the quality of learning, they are for many, the only element that 'counts'. Across sites, for employers and trainees, relevance to workplace requirements and enhanced employment opportunities constitute the basis for measuring quality in terms of training courses. This employment focus is reflected by government policy which favours funding job-oriented courses over those of basic literacy and numeracy for example. Relevance to workplace requirements engenders a need for increased liaison between training providers and employers and a consequent demand for customised courses, not always cost effective. One group training provider in Leatherwood identified a problem of 'mismatches between what schools are delivering and what the market requires' while a major organisation representative in Bridgetown claimed that there was an overall deficiency in job-readiness in terms of attitude and work ethics. A private employer in Leatherwood stated that 'relevance' in terms of standard equipment in the workplace should be incorporated into training. As the desired outcome is for the trainee to efficiently operate equipment on the job, quality training should recognise the differences between technology/equipment in training rooms and the equipment used in small rural businesses, with courses being adjusted accordingly. Training providers and some trainees recognise, however, the drawbacks of training with a narrow, job-specific focus, that is, a lack of generic, easily transferable job-skills. Another element necessary for successful training is accurate marketing and information for prospective trainees and employers about the contents and realistic expectations of training. Positive evaluations of training largely rested on perceptions of practical, relevant knowledge, immediately useable, to enhance job performance. This desired outcome of employment application translates to a preference for on-the-job training by most employers. 'This makes the training relatively short, sharp and cheap for enterprises – one reason why it is so popular with managers who perceive a high, potential return from relatively modest training outlay' (McIntyre et al. 1996, p. 63).

Quality based on user choice and other policy matters

The small size and the degree of isolation of rural communities severely restrict quality of course choice across the sites. Flexible modes of delivery such as online and correspondence, while making a difference, are not panaceas for rural problems. Access to necessary equipment, even Internet access alone, is often difficult and independent learning is not effective for many students. Rivertown interviewees in particular cited access, in terms of long distances to travel, as a major inhibitor of choice. Choice was further restricted at Rivertown by a perceived under-utilisation of the local TAFE annexe which relied on Timbertown TAFE to distribute funding. Government policy and funding generally are perceived as having a greater influence than local consumer demand on the ranges of courses offered by institutions. At times, policies fostering competition resulted in a counter-productive duplication of courses in already thin markets. Conversely, one of the schools in Bellbird said they were unable to fill the demand for Child Courses because of insufficient workplaces and trainers or assessors. One respondent in Bridgetown felt local institutions were not listening to the needs of the community while a community organisation in Billabong conducted an assessment seminar of the courses run by one of the local training providers in order to receive community feedback. The input from local learners revealed a need for 'sampler' or introductory courses.

Government policy, generally linked to funding and/or opportunities, can inhibit quality learning because of rigid selection criteria. Courses in demand locally do not always meet funding criteria and other, less relevant courses are being chosen. The success of many courses depends on knowledge of local needs and markets but at times government policy favours larger national training providers with low unit-delivery costs over smaller local ones. Changes in policy and pilot programs create spasmodic funding with planned courses not always realised and continuation courses not always available. Short-term funding also impacts on the quality of teachers. Organisations that rely on annual funding, for example, find it difficult to attract quality personnel due to job insecurity. On occasion policies designed to address the needs of disadvantaged groups such as Indigenous, unemployed or case-managed can backfire by disadvantaging mainstream groups. One example from the Billabong data illustrates how a course restricted to Indigenous people resulted in a non-Indigenous person having to travel out of town to study the same course. Likewise there is a perception that government policies such as 'Work for the Dole' are restricting workplace training opportunities even further in an already thin employer market. In addition, funding allocation for rural institutions may be based on city campus criteria and not allow sufficient budget for travel for teachers, subsidised students and equipment delivery. Policy requiring voluminous paperwork and the understanding of complex regulations is proving to be a major inhibitor in terms of RTO renewal and apprenticeships. Finally, policy which fosters competition between local training providers does not always have the intended result of improving the quality of learning in small communities. In some cases the competing providers employ the same tutors and access the same central resources.

Tension between competition and collaboration

A tension between competition and collaboration was identified in a number of the sites. The experiences in part of the Forrestville site and in Bellbird are typical of these. In both cases competition prompted by national system policies had led to a proliferation of courses of a particular type in a thin market (literacy in Forrestville and traineeships in Bellbird). This occurred at the expense of a range of different courses that existed under previous collaborative arrangements. The competitive nature of the training market was blamed by respondents in Possum Point for a considerable turnover of private providers in the 12 months since the initial interviews, leading to disrupted study experiences for students. In one case, a group of 93 rural trainees had been enrolled with first one, then another RTO that both experienced financial difficulties and left the district. At the time of the 2000 interviews the group was enrolled with TAFE, their third registered training organisation in 12 months.

Summary of issues relevant to effectiveness

Groups, committees and ongoing relationships between providers and clients for planning and delivering training are perceived to improve the effectiveness of VET in the regional sites. This is largely because these groups are aware of local needs. Groups and collaborative relationships lead to better outcomes when there are structures, resources and human and social infrastructure to ensure effective negotiations with providers outside the group and smooth functioning of collaborative and cooperative arrangements. Structures imposed by State boundaries impede effective cooperative arrangements.

The small size of some communities works against the effectiveness of collaborative training arrangements. A tension between competition and collaboration was seen to reduce the effectiveness of VET, especially in the thin markets of the smaller communities in the study.

The flexibility of delivery allowed and encouraged by national training policies was considered to have improved the effectiveness of training in many cases, especially for enterprises. However, were there was no face-to-face support for students, distance materials by themselves were unsatisfactory for many clients.

There was widespread concern about the quality of training and assessment, centering around two issues. First, the difficulty of attracting proficient trainers and facilitators in rural areas, compounded by insufficient incentive for professional development. Second, available funding was perceived to be insufficient to deliver training that was both flexible in terms of content and location and provided high quality vocational learning.

It appears rural and regional areas are in, and have been for many years, a state of ongoing crisis and change. To respond to these changes adequately local leadership must collaborate by developing structures that both consult with the community on a needs basis and collaborate with outside organisations for resourcing and expertise, and importantly, influence at a political level. Competition policy, however, can work against the very collaboration that is necessary to achieve this unity. Although it can be argued that much change is inevitable (for example, farm economies of scale and mechanisation, globalisation), it is also apparent that government policy has an enormous impact on regional areas. It follows that governments are then capable of making things less difficult for regional communities to respond to the inevitable changes, by supporting, facilitating and resourcing local community based leadership initiatives or by making more rural and regional friendly policy.

Synthesis of previous discussion

There is not one best model of VET collaborative arrangements that will fit all situations. There are, however, a range of features and characteristics of effective collaborative arrangements. Local planning and involvement are key features for effective outcomes. Effective local planning and involvement require human, physical and financial resources of sufficient quality and quantity. These resources are required in order to become a learning community; they are an essential part of the learning infrastructure.

Learning communities

The bulk of recent research about education and training presupposes clients serviced by providers. For this reason, evaluation of VET relies on surveys and field observations of given variables (for example, access, participation and outcomes measures). There is evidence from various CRLRA research outcomes to support a revised model of VET that shifts the presupposition of the supply-demand, provider-client model as the centrepiece, to a model where the provision of VET is an *outcome* of local VET dynamic. Such a shift in thinking requires a particular tailoring of the policy, strategic and resourcing aspects of VET. It is this concern that lies at the heart of the research outcomes for 2000, and which is illustrated in its various dimensions in the case studies themselves.

Evidence for the re-focused model referred to above arose first in last year's research report where it was suggested that local collaborative planning generally enhanced VET outcomes, and that this was most noticeable when social cohesion, trust and social capital was present in the networks. This year's research confirms these more general findings and extends the detail around successful configurations of VET learning communities. The focus is particularly on collaboration because it involves and presupposes a range of attributes evident in all communities, but is particularly highly valued outside of cities: in particular networks of reciprocity, trust and shared values. These attributes are now recognised as important variables in the educational context by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (Australian Bureau of Statistics, December 2000), under the umbrella heading of *social capital* (see Sections 4.1, 5.2.5, 5.3.1).

In addition, a number of highly regarded economists also argue that a strong community base and civic structure is a prerequisite for a strong economy (e.g. Rifkin 1999). Key strands of research that support aspects of the model shift include:

- Research on endogenous planning processes as successful while exogenous strategies are less so (e.g. Hugonnier 1999, Shucksmith 2000);
- Research on network theory, e.g. Knoke & Kuklinski (1982, p. 11) who argue for the utility, for many regional, rural and isolated communities, of considering relational measures '... that cannot be measured by simply aggregating the attributes of individual members';
- Social capital research (e.g. Woolcock & Narayan 2000) that has established the greater success rates of interventions in communities where social capital is resourced in readiness for the intervention.

The Australian Bureau of Statistics (December 2000) working paper acknowledges that more work needs to be done to ensure that social capital concepts within the education and training context are defined and can be measured reliably and accurately. The case study examples of collaborative partnerships and the issues about quality learning outlined above allow the teasing out of some of the aspects that should be included in a model of quality assurance for VET in regional communities.

Quality assurance model

The importance of meeting diverse local vocational learning needs is the overriding issue to emerge at all sites. What are the various components of meeting needs that have emerged in this study? It is possible to see how a model of quality assurance or benchmarking of vocational learning could be drawn from the needs-meeting model and its various dimensions described in the Forrestville and Emu Springs case studies. Such a model would need to focus on the vocational learning experience. This approach to quality assurance is called the 'vocational learning journey' in recent benchmarking work by the Office for Vocational Education and Training, Tasmania. Such a model integrates the earlier segmented coverage of assumptions about quality vocational learning. The model has four resource components whose quality must be assured:

1. Resources of the learner (social and cultural, learning styles and preferences, literacy, English language and numeracy);
2. Resources related to the learning interactions (including the duration and intensity; the mode: e.g. online or face-to-face);
3. Human resources such as the professionalism of the training staff and coordinators for work placements;
4. Infrastructural resources supplied to the context of operation (remoteness, policy prescriptions such as competition and national evaluation criteria, RTO organisation's structure and ethos, e.g. 'managerialism', funding, equipment, spaces for learning to occur, localised partnerships, leadership and collaborative structures).

An integrated model means that quality vocational learning will therefore be auditable by evaluating the degree to which diverse local vocational learning needs are met within a framework of national consistency measures.

Competition and collaboration in regional communities

It appears that opportunity to access a wide range of VET courses and learner support services has, in some communities been sacrificed for 'choice' where choice in regional communities often translates into a choice of provider for a narrow number of types and levels of training. There is evidence that scarce provider resources are being used to compete against other providers at the same time as the quality of trainers and support services for learners is being questioned by clients.

While clients, especially enterprises, appreciate the opportunity to purchase quality, customised training, such choice is not a reality for many in regional communities. A competitive training market is assumed to ensure quality training at competitive prices as clients choose only those providers that deliver quality training at competitive prices. It seems that clients (individuals, enterprises and communities) in regional Australia are often not able to identify and attract the quality training that they need. Resourcing that builds informed VET clients who are part of learning communities will help ensure the quality of VET. Funding arrangements need to encourage collaboration and sharing of resources in thin markets such as those that exist in all but a few popular training areas in the very largest of the communities in regional Australia. There are some models of Commonwealth programs that support collaboration and resource sharing that could be adapted to the VET sector (for example, programs of the Department of Transport and Regional Services and the Department of Family and Community Services). A combination of proactive, informed learning communities and collaborative resource sharing between providers and other organisations in communities has the potential to improve VET outcomes in regional Australia.

Professional development for VET trainers and assessors

The challenge of training a workforce that is increasingly employed on a causal or short-term basis or is self-employed has been recognised by the National Centre for Vocational

Education Research's workshop on the Changing Nature of Work and other recent literature (see for example Waterhouse et al. 1999). Many of the trainers working in regional Australia are self-employed or casual or short-term employees. In several study sites, the same trainer would be employed no matter which competing training provider was successful in obtaining funding.

Given the concerns expressed about poor quality training and learning support and inconsistent assessment, trainers and assessors need to be encouraged to participate in professional development activities. A number of providers noted a lack of quality trainers and that funding arrangements and competitive pressures did not encourage them to provide professional development for those they employ. Care needs to be taken to ensure that professional development is attractive, affordable and accessible to trainers and assessors in rural and remote parts of Australia.

Literacy and numeracy

A mismatch between the literacy and numeracy requirements of available VET training materials and the skills of students is a recurring theme in the data for this project. Poor literacy skills were a barrier to accessing training for Indigenous and non-Indigenous people. This problem is exacerbated in small communities where thin markets make face-to-face classes non-viable, requiring students to use self-paced print and electronic materials. Self-paced learning requires independent learning skills as well suitable literacy levels. A significant emphasis on pre-employment independent learning skills and literacy and numeracy training as well as support for learners in job-related VET is required.

Role of public providers

Public providers found in the sites were principally TAFE Institutes and schools, with some activity from public ACE providers. Schools frequently initiated collaborative arrangements. In a number of the sites the TAFE presence was an Annexe or Outreach Centre of a larger institution. In one case this distance inhibited matching training provision to local needs. TAFE has traditionally been for the public to access VET. From the data available, the new, competitive system has increased choice of provider but resulted in no obvious 'one-stop' access point for information about VET programs.

Conclusion

The previous sections of this chapter have provided a synthesis and general discussion of the project findings. These findings have been portrayed in detail in the set of 10 case studies by reference to rich qualitative data. The remaining task, one which is taken up in the next, final chapter, is to extract and present the findings and their related implications for action.

Summary of findings and implications

Findings and implications for action: Summary

The 26 findings and related implications for the study have been illustrated in the ten case studies, then brought together in the synthesis provided in the previous chapter. The suggestions (or implications) for action that stem from the findings are closely related to those findings. In the case studies and in the previous chapter, the findings answer specific research questions for the study. For the convenience of the reader, the present and final chapter extracts the key findings and their related implications for action and lists them.

The reader is referred to the notes about generalisations made from qualitative research, to be found in the introductory chapter. In addition, it should be noted that these findings are tentative, and are likely to undergo some additional refinement. They are also subject to the availability of new data.

The 26 findings and related implications for action, some minor and some not so minor, are now presented by topic.

INTEGRATED MODEL OF VET BENCHMARKING FOR VOCATIONAL LEARNING

The ultimate question for this study relates to ways of improving the effectiveness of VET in meeting stakeholder needs.

FINDING 1

Quality vocational learning in the regions studied depends on:

- the quality and professional development of educators,
- collaborative arrangements overcoming the constraints of competition,
- the nature of national Training Packages in relation to the perceived barriers presented by literacy and numeracy,
- high quality assessment of trainees/apprentices,
- user choice, in terms of access and availability.

FINDING 2

The importance of meeting diverse local vocational learning needs is the overriding issue to emerge at all sites.

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FINDING 3

To successfully meet diverse and changing local VET needs, quality in VET should focus on an integrated model of VET based on the vocational learning experience, or what could be called the 'vocational learning journey', rather than a system which focuses only on individual sectors such as provider and industry.

FINDING 4

An integrated model of quality assurance or benchmarking of vocational learning (Finding 3) is required. Such a model should shift the presupposition of the supply-demand, provider-client model as the centrepiece, to a model where the provision of VET is an *outcome* of the local VET dynamic. Such an approach requires a particular tailoring of three aspects of VET: policy, strategy and resourcing.

FINDING 5

An integrated model ensures that quality vocational learning will be auditable by evaluating the degree to which diverse local vocational learning needs are met within a framework of national consistency measures through four resource components:

- Resources of the learner (social and cultural, learning styles and preferences, literacy, English language and numeracy);
- Resources related to the learning interactions (including the duration and intensity; the mode: e.g. online or face-to-face);
- Human resources such as the professionalism of the training staff and coordinators for work placements;
- Infrastructural resources supplied to the context of operation (remoteness, policy prescriptions such as competition and national evaluation criteria, RTO organisation's structure and ethos, e.g. 'managerialism', funding, equipment, spaces for learning to occur, localised partnerships, leadership and collaborative structures).

REGIONAL VET DRIVERS

FINDING 6

Seven drivers of effective VET are identified:

- *Community* collaborative response to adversity
- Collaborations based on *cultural* association
- *Enterprise*-driven partnerships
- *Natural resource* management and community-led multi-sectoral collaborations
- *Policy*-driven collaborations
- *Provider*-driven collaborations
- Skills development for *industry*

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FINDING 7

The enterprise, provider and industry VET drivers are found to be effective, sustainable and of most benefit to all stakeholders when planned and developed collaboratively with the local community to meet local needs. This finding confirms the findings from the previous year's project.

FINDING 8

Three of the drivers in Finding 6 above (enterprise, provider and industry) are well recognised and resourced. VET outcomes can be enhanced significantly by explicitly recognising and strategically resourcing the four additional drivers listed, namely *community, cultural, natural resources* and *policy*. The integrated model of assuring quality VET in Findings 4 and 5 would account for the seven drivers of VET.

LEARNING COMMUNITIES

FINDING 9

Effective local planning and involvement for VET is confirmed as requiring human, physical and financial resources of sufficient quality and quantity. These resources are required in order to develop a learning community. As such they are an essential part of the learning infrastructure. This finding confirms the findings from the previous year's project.

FINDING 10

Local collaborative planning generally is confirmed as enhancing VET outcomes, and this is most noticeable when trust and social capital are present in the networks.

FINDING 11

The term 'learning communities' denotes the collective dynamic that promotes the effectiveness of VET at local levels. This learning culture underpins the integrated model of assuring VET quality as proposed in Findings 4 and 5. It is therefore important that ways of describing and profiling these learning communities should be developed. It is foreseen that the scheduled CRLRA ANTA 2001 research program should in part address this aspect.

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QUALITY VOCATIONAL LEARNING

FINDING 12

Funding bodies and providers that are not in touch with local needs are perceived to reduce the effectiveness of VET.

FINDING 13

Course participation in 1999 led to improved self confidence and better performance in existing jobs for most participants, with few obtaining a new job as a result of their course.

FINDING 14

There is some evidence suggesting that employers and other organisations in the study sites have an increasingly positive orientation toward training and see a relationship between training and success in achieving organisation goals.

COLLABORATION

FINDING 15

Collaborations maximise the outcomes from scarce human, physical and financial resources in regional communities. Often, the need to avoid duplication of services and maximise the range of opportunities in small communities with access to few resources, is mentioned as a reason for collaboration. The need to pool resources is an important driver of collaboration and partnerships between people and organisations in the more isolated communities away from the larger main sites of the research.

FINDING 16

The qualities of collaboration that enhance VET outcomes for all but some private providers are:

- proactive, collaborative and enabling leadership,
- presence of local coordinators and brokers,
- sufficient financial and physical resources,
- balance of internal and external networks,
- meeting a mix of individual, community and regional needs,
- shared visions and values,
- sufficient continuity of leaders and programs,
- collaborations that are highly relevant to visions, values and goals of the partners, and
- sufficient levels of trust.

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FINDING 17

There are five VET outcomes of effective collaboration identified:

- savings from shared resources,
- better informed VET clients (individuals, enterprises and communities),
- identified, accessible pathways for clients,
- better community response to change, and
- enhanced social, economic and environmental outcomes.

FINDING 18

There are five barriers to effective collaboration identified:

- tension between competition and collaboration,
- inadequate human and physical resourcing and funding arrangements,
- the small size of a community,
- lack of continuity of policy and programs, and
- lack of a common vision, values or understanding, often manifested in a lack of local input and ownership of training.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

FINDING 19

Given the concerns expressed about poor quality training and learning support and inconsistent assessment in rural and remote sites, combined with the increasingly casual or short-term employment pool, it is found that there is a lack of regular and relevant professional development being undertaken by trainers and assessors. It is indicated that professional development would need to be made attractive, relevant, affordable and accessible to trainers and assessors in rural and remote parts of Australia.

FINDING 20

The right kind of enabling leadership at the local level triggers and maintains VET activity, contributing substantially to effective VET outcomes. The six key attributes of enabling leadership are found to be:

- building internal networks;
- building links between internal and external networks;
- building historicity;
- building shared visions;
- building shared communication;
- building each others' self confidence and facilitating identity shifts.

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FINDING 21

Leadership', as a generic skill, is the single greatest factor in effective VET local dynamics. Professional development in enabling leadership is therefore an essential component for any VET stakeholder involved in collaborative VET planning.

COLLABORATION AND COMPETITION

FINDING 22

There is evidence that scarce provider resources are being used to compete against other providers instead of being spent on the quality of trainers and support services for learners. Clients (individuals, enterprises and communities) in regional Australia are often not able to identify and attract the quality training that they need. Resourcing arrangements that encourage collaboration and sharing of resources in thin markets should be adopted.

FLEXIBLE DELIVERY

FINDING 23

There is some evidence of a move toward more flexible delivery methods in the short time (12 months) since the original data collection. Flexible delivery, delivery in many workplace sites and customisation of courses for particular clients were perceived to have improved the effectiveness of VET in the sites.

FINDING 24

The isolation that students encountered in self-paced and wholly or largely on-the-job training was seen as detrimental to learning outcomes.

NO ONE-STOP VET SHOP

FINDING 25

Public providers found in the sites were principally TAFE Institutes and schools, with some activity from public ACE providers. TAFE has traditionally been a focal point for public access to VET. The new, competitive system has increased choice of provider but in these ten sites seems to have resulted in no obvious 'one-stop' access point for information about VET providers and programs.

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LARGE PROVIDERS FAVOURED, LEADING TO LACK OF LOCAL TRAINING DIVERSITY

FINDING 26

The research shows that government funding tends to favour national or large providers over local ones. At the same time, and perhaps as a result, there is a loss of diversity of VET courses and offerings, as providers vie for the same dollar by tendering for the same courses.

Conclusion

The major finding of the second year of the Role of VET in Regional Australia project is that learning communities, characterised by proactive, collaborative effort, are where VET outcomes are most effective. VET that takes place in a context of informed communities which are able to work with VET providers resident within and outside of the community is most likely to match the needs of the community. This finding suggests a fresh approach to assuring VET quality, one that is built on the dynamics of effective VET rather than focusing on any particular stakeholders. Vocational learning is the centrepiece of this approach. Resources used to equip communities with human infrastructure for collaboration are an investment that will improve the returns to resources spent on VET. Such measures can be highly cost-effective, requiring largely a re-apportionment of resources rather than additional resourcing. The close relationship between local VET effectiveness and national policy, strategy and planning is therefore implicated in the research findings of this year's study. By encouraging and assuring sound local dynamics in VET with resourced strategies that promote responsive and distinctive regional solutions, ANTA can in turn expect to see a greater uptake and use of national frameworks, and greater acceptance of the usefulness and relevance of national strategies.

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Note: This reference list combines references from the Interim, Progress and Final Reports for the 2000 phase of the Role of VET project.

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